

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE OF WORSHIP

INTRODUCTION

A young married couple went out one evening for dinner in celebration of the bride's birthday. They enjoyed a delicious meal and romantic conversation. Just at the perfect moment, the husband pulled out the birthday card from underneath the dinner table and said, "Sweetie, I love you. Happy birthday!" The blushing wife opened up the beautifully decorated card and pulled out a membership card to a local hunting farm. She tried to sound excited and thankful, but had a hard time hiding the disappointment. The husband began to frown and then asked, "What is wrong? I enjoy hunting a great deal and would love to teach you."

The above story perfectly illustrates the principle by which most Christians today worship God. Sincere, honest, Bible believing Christians approach God in worship, not according to how He desires to be worshiped, but according to how they desire to worship Him. The Scriptures, however, teach the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW). The RPW states that Christians must worship God only according to His express command.

The husband's gift to his bride illustrated how most Christians worship God, however, the following example illustrates how Christians ought to worship God. A

hungry customer walks into a restaurant and sits down. The waiter promptly approaches the table and takes the customer's order: "I will have a cheeseburger, with no pickles, cooked medium, with mustard and ketchup, please." The waiter promptly returns with the customer's order and asks if everything is acceptable. The customer finds that the cheeseburger is cooked medium, has no pickles, and has only mustard and ketchup. The pleased customer looks at the waiter and says, "Thank you! This is exactly what I ordered." If the waiter had forgotten to add mustard or had placed pickles on the burger, then it would have been unsatisfactory and the customer would have complained. In the example above, however, everything was done as ordered and nothing was added or left out.

The waiter illustration is not only a catchy way of illustrating the RPW, but is also consistent with the teaching of Scripture. This essay will first demonstrate that the RPW was firmly rooted in the practice of the Old Testament (OT) people of God. Secondly, this essay will demonstrate that the RPW is continued in the New Testament (NT). Finally, this paper will discuss two additional thoughts related to the RPW.

THE RPW IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

I. The Principle Established by Direct Command:

- a. Exodus 20:4, *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image..."*

Most Christians know that God first told His people not to worship any other god, *"You shall have no other gods before Me."* (Ex 20:3) Orthodox Christians have always believed in one true God. Christians, therefore, understand clearly that worshipping any

other god (Baal, Allah, Buddha, etc.) is idolatry and violates the first commandment.

Many Christians, however, do not clearly understand the difference between the first and second commandment. They know that the first commandment teaches them to worship God and Him only, but fail to see the second commandment's teaching, namely the law that governs how to worship God.

The second commandment not only prohibits the making of a carved image, but it also and primarily prohibits God's people from making such an image. God's people used all sorts of images and physical objects in the worship of God. God, however, commanded all these objects (the Ark, the Lampstand, the Altar, etc) to be used in worship. The emphasis of the second commandment, therefore, is about who has the right to make images. The second commandment makes it clear that God's people are prohibited from making their own images.

It is also important to note that these images, and the overall commandment, are in reference to worship. The fifth verse says, "*You shall not bow down to them nor serve them.*" These two prohibitions obviously refer to the act of worship and are the two most frequently used words in the OT to describe the act of worship (עבד, חזה).

Furthermore, one must see that the second commandment is referring to the worship of the true God and not the worship of a false god.¹ Many passages of Scripture in the Old Testament become unexplainable if the second commandment is a reference to the worship of a false god.² The key idea is to see that the second commandment forbids

¹ Roman Catholics believe in the Ten Commandments, but they lump the first two commandments into one, and split the tenth into two. Thus, they see no problem in making images and venerating statues of Jesus, and dubiously see a distinction between coveting a neighbor's wife and coveting a neighbor's possessions.

² These Scriptures are those that follow under the next two sections: The Principle Established by Inference and by Example.

God's people from making their own means of worshiping God, either by images or some other means.

- b. Deuteronomy 12:32. *"Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."*

The twelfth chapter of Deuteronomy is directly addressing the topic of worship. Moses, in this chapter, sternly warned God's people against the pagan worship practices of the Canaanites. He says in verse 4, *"You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things."* He not only addressed the general topic of worship but more importantly he addressed the worship of the true God. Moses continued to elaborate on the various aspects of Old Testament worship. The topic was clearly the worship of the true and living God (v.31). He concludes by summing up the main point of the chapter, which is the clearest statement of the RPW in the Bible, *"Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."* Moses clearly taught that Israel was not allowed to worship God by their self-appointed means; instead, they must worship according to God's appointed means.

II. The Principle Established by Inference:

- a. Moses's Teaching Before the Exodus: *"We will go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as He will command us."*
(Exodus 8:27) *"Our livestock also shall go with us ... For we must take*

some of them to serve the Lord our God, and even we do not know with what we must serve the Lord until we arrive there." (Exodus 10:26) "Then the children of Israel went away and did so; just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did." (Exodus 12:28)

Moses recorded several important details in the book of Exodus. These details show that the RPW was adhered to before the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. These inferences support the idea that the second commandment, and the RPW contained within it, is a moral law that transcends all the covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and New). Moses, in the first verse above, essentially told Pharaoh that he did not know how they would worship the Lord, for the Lord had not yet told him. If Moses did not operate under the RPW, then he would not be waiting for God's instructions. He, in actuality, did operate under the RPW, even though the law had not been officially given to him on Mount Sinai. He, therefore, told Pharaoh that he and the children of Israel would worship the Lord, "*...as He will command us.*"

The second verse, Exodus 10:26, continues to support the idea that the RPW was normative for God's people before the giving of the law. Moses again told Pharaoh to let the children of Israel depart from the land so that they might worship Him on the mountain. Moses clearly indicated that he was operating under the RPW by saying, "*even we do not know with what we must serve the Lord until we arrive there.*" The third verse listed above includes the important phrase, "*just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did*" in reference to the keeping of the first Passover in Egypt. The Israelites observed the religious ceremony, as an act of worship, and did so according to

God's explicit command. One can easily infer from these verses that God's people operated under the RPW even before the giving of the law on Mount Sinai.

- b. The Construction of the Tabernacle - Exodus 25:40 *"And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain."*

Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the details for the Tabernacle, for all of its fixtures, and for some of its ceremonial worship regulations. Throughout all of chapters 25-31 and 36-40, Moses either received or gave these instructions. Several comments in this section of Exodus make it very clear that God's people worshiped Him according to the RPW. The above verse is in the context of making the Lampstand, but the same idea is expressed in Exodus 26:30 in reference to the whole Tabernacle, *"And you shall raise up the tabernacle according to its pattern which you were shown on the mountain."* God is not allowing any room for Moses, Aaron, or any other Israelite to choose how they will worship the Lord.

Furthermore, the phrase, *"as the Lord commanded Moses,"* appears 16 times (Ex 39:1,5,7,21,26,29,31,21,42,43; and 40:16,19,21,23,25,27,29) in the last two chapters of Exodus and all of them are in the context of worship. Unlike with modern writing techniques, Moses did not have the option to underline, or bold font what he wanted to emphasize. Biblical authors, especially Hebrew writers, made emphasis by repeating important phrases and words. In the case of the worship of God in the Tabernacle, God

made it clear that He was to be worshiped by His direct command for He repeated this point 16 times.

- c. The Worship Ordinances of Jeroboam – 1 Kings 12:28ff. *"Therefore the king asked advice, made two calves of gold, and said to the people, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!'"*

After the reign of Solomon, Israel split into two kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom followed Jeroboam and the Southern Kingdom followed Rehoboam. Jeroboam immediately instituted new worship ordinances in the Northern Kingdom in order to keep the Northern tribes loyal to his kingdom. He made, therefore, his own images (the calves of gold v.28), his own place of worship (Bethel and Dan v.29), his own class of Priests (v.31) and his own holy day (15th day of the 8th month v.32).

Jeroboam's innovations draw out two important points. First, he was clearly worshipping the true God. After he made the two golden calves, he said to all the people, *"Here are your gods³, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt!"* Jeroboam intended to worship the true God for he clearly pointed out that these calves represented the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, not Baal or some other Canaanite god.

Secondly, notice how the author of 1 Kings clearly points out that Jeroboam made these

³ The Hebrew word for God is almost always used in the plural form, whether the author is referring to the one true God, or the false gods of Canaan. The reader of the English bible must not think that Jeroboam is consciously worshipping false gods. His understanding of who this God is comes from the next phrase, namely, that God which brought Israel out of Egypt. Therefore, the New King James Version is not entirely correct by rendering *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים) in the plural English form. The English bible could just as easily be translated, *"Here is your god..."* Exodus 32:4 is an example of this exact translation opinion. The word is plural and yet the New King James Version translates it in the singular.

worship ordinances up for himself, "...which he had devised in his own heart" (v.33). The verb *השע* (*ahsah*, "to make"), which is the same Hebrew word used in the second commandment, is repeated in 1 Kings 12:28-33 seven times. Jeroboam's worship ordinances were not wrong because he was worshiping a false god, but because he was worshiping the true God by means, which he had made (*השע*). Jeroboam, furthermore, rejected the place where God commanded His people to worship Him (Jerusalem), the people who were to lead the worship (the Levites), the representation of God's special presence (the Ark), and the various holy days of the ceremonial law. These worship ordinances of Jeroboam are repeatedly referred to in the Scriptures as the "*sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat*."⁴ Jeroboam, therefore, offered the true God false worship because it was not according to God's command.

- d. Child Sacrifice - Jeremiah 7:31 *"And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart."*

Judah became so corrupt and wicked that before the Babylonians took them into exile, they adopted child sacrifice as a form of worship. What is interesting, however, about Jeremiah's reasoning is that he did not mention murder as the reason for why child sacrifice was wrong. He did not mention that they were worshiping false gods by means of child sacrifice. The Lord, instead, said, "... *I did not command...*" child sacrifice!

⁴ 2 Kings 10:29 *"However Jehu did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin, that is, from the golden calves that were at Bethel and Dan."*

Clearly this passage gives additional evidence for why the second commandment should be understood as regulating worship according to God's command. Child sacrifice was wrong for several reasons, but the Scripture specifically lists this reason.

- e. Unauthorized Instruments - Amos 6:5. *"Who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David."*

When David made plans for the Temple, God directed him to incorporate instruments into the Temple sacrificial service (1 Chronicles 25:6). A mark of orthodox Old Testament worship was that specific Levites, played specific instruments, during a specific time in the temple (2 Chr. 29:25-30). Amos, however, condemned Israel for "inventing" for themselves instruments like David. If God had only forbidden the worship of false gods, then there would have been no problem with making instruments and praising the true God with them. Amos, however, clearly pointed out that Israel was not only to worship the true God, but they were also to only worship Him according to His command. The Israelites worshiped God wrongly at this point because, first, they were not in the Temple; second, the musicians were not Levites⁵; and third, they "invented" their own instruments and were not using the ones directed by God.⁶ Amos, therefore, with this rebuke, assumes the RPW.

⁵ The Levites had departed from the Northern Kingdom. 2 Chronicles 11:14, *"For the Levites left their common-lands and their possessions and came to Judah and Jerusalem, for Jeroboam and his sons had rejected them from serving as priests to the Lord."*

⁶ 1 Chronicles 25:6, *"All these were under the direction of their father for the music in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, stringed instruments, and harps, for the service of the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were under the authority of the king."*

- f. Sacrifice by Command - Isaiah 1:12-13a *"When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices..."*

Isaiah rebuked Judah for their sin in the first portion of his book and then said something very interesting at chapter 1 verse 12. He asked Judah, in the context of worshiping God, *"Who has required this from your hand?"* The clear idea is that Judah needs to think about who has told them to perform the sacrifice by which they are worshiping God. Isaiah is specifically telling them that they are to think about who has commanded them to perform this act of worship. If God has required them to perform this sacrifice, then it is acceptable. But if anyone else has commanded this act of worship, then it is unacceptable. Clearly they are worshiping the true God, and yet God is not pleased. God is not pleased because they are not worshiping according to God's command

III. The Principle Established by Example:⁷

- a. The Golden Calf - Exodus 32:4-5 *"And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"*

⁷ Additional examples can be found here: Uzza and the Ark - 1 Chronicles 15:13, The Tabernacle - Numbers 8:4; The Passover - 2 Chronicles 30:5; An Altar - Ezra 3:2; Praise of the Levites - Nehemiah 12:24.

Shortly after Israel escaped the hand of Pharaoh, they received God's law at Mt. Sinai in the desert. Moses remained on the mountain for many days and the people grew weary of waiting on him. Moses had been the token of God's presence to them, but because he was not present, they desired to have another token of God's presence. Aaron, being seduced by the people, heeded their word and made a golden calf, which they began to worship. The important aspect to notice in this short narrative is that Israel intended on worshiping the LORD and had no intention of worshiping a false god. The people were told, *"This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"* They did not break the first commandment, but rather the second commandment. Aaron and his band undoubtedly committed a sin because God's wrath burned against them. Paul, furthermore, picked up on this narrative in 1 Corinthians 10:7 and called them "idolaters". Idolatry, therefore, does not merely consist in worshiping false gods, but also worshiping the true God in a false way.

- b. Nadab and Abihu – Leviticus 10:1-2 *"Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the Lord."*

Nadab and Abihu were godly men. Exodus 24:1, 9 teaches us that they were specifically marked out to go up the mountain with Moses and the elders of Israel to

worship God and be with Him in a special way. The Scriptures do not say that they were envious or wicked men, like Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas who held a similar religious position of authority. A conclusion, therefore, one must draw from Exodus 24 is that they were upright men who served the LORD. The LORD, however, killed them during the inaugural worship of the Tabernacle. This brief account is the clearest example of the RPW in the entire Bible. Nadab and Abihu were not killed for being wicked, or for worshipping a false god. They were killed because they offered God fire, "*which He had not commanded them.*" The fire that they offered is also called "profane" (רַץ *zar*). This word carries the idea of "strange" or even "unauthorized" and is the same word used to describe a stranger to the nation of Israel (Num 1:51). One must not, therefore, think that there was something immoral about the fire they offered. The idea is that the fire they offered God was "foreign" to God's mind.⁸

- c. Saul's Sacrifice – 1 Samuel 13:13 *"And Samuel said to Saul, 'You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you.'"*

Samuel had recently anointed Saul as King and the people were gathered to Saul at Gilgal in order to fight the Philistines. Saul, however, was under stress because many people were afraid and were leaving the ranks of the army. He, therefore, felt compelled to offer a burnt offering in order to invoke God's blessing on the situation. The fact that Saul offered a burnt offering to the LORD had at least one major flaw, namely, Samuel

⁸ The violation of worshipping God in a way "*not commanded*" comes into sharper focus when one realizes that in the immediately preceding verses the phrase "*as the LORD commanded*" appears 13 times (Leviticus 8:4,5,9,13,17,21,29,35,36; 9:6,7,10,21).

commanded Saul to wait and never commanded Saul to offer the sacrifice. In 1 Samuel 10:8, Samuel told Saul, "...Seven days you shall wait, till I come to you and show you what you should do." Saul did wait seven days, "according to the time set by Samuel," (13:8), but he went past what was commanded in that he offered the sacrifice himself. Saul was not a priest and did not have the authority to offer sacrifices, nor to choose when and where priests could offer sacrifices. Such authority, however, was invested in the Prophet Samuel. When Samuel arrived on the scene, he specified Saul's error clearly, telling him, "You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you." Saul should have, instead, refrained from unauthorized worship and waited until further instructions.

THE RPW CONTINUED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- I. Jesus and the Samaritan Women – John 4:23-24 *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."*

One of the clearest indications that the New Testament continues the basic principle of Old Testament worship is found in these two verses. First, Jesus comments on what worship will be like in the New Covenant. Jesus says, "*But the hour is coming and now is.*" These words indicate that Jesus is speaking, not about the Old Testament, but about the worship of the Christian Church.

Secondly, He indicates two aspects of worship, namely that, Christians worship in the "*Spirit*" and in "*truth*." No doubt a mark of New Covenant worship is an emphasis on the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to worship God with genuine hearts. God desires, not only correct acts of worship, but also Spirit-empowered worship. The Old Testament people were not entirely without the Spirit in their worship, but with the pouring out of the Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost, Spirit-empowered worship became a greater feature of the worship of God's people.

Thirdly, advocates of the RPW, while certainly acknowledging the requirement for Spirit-empowered worship, also recognize the requirement for true worship. There are two reasons why true worship mentioned here by Jesus must mean worship that is according to God's command. First, Jesus clearly states that the Father is seeking a certain type of worshiper, namely "true worshipers". This statement implies that one could be a "false worshiper" yet not be worshiping a false god. The Samaritans were half-breeds, but they claimed to worship the Lord. Jesus did not tell her that she worshiped an idol, but that she worshiped in ignorance saying, "*You worship what you do not know.*"

But there is a second reason why true worship mentioned here by Jesus must mean worship that is offered according to God's command. The second reason is based on the fact that true worship is spoken of alongside spirit worship. Many Christians believe that true worship must simply be done with the right spirit. As long as a Christian has the right spirit, then they may do a number of things as an act of worship. Jesus, however, already covered the requirement to offer genuine worship when He declared that the Father was seeking "*spirit*" worship. He must, therefore, mean something different by the word "*truth*" than simply sincere worship. He must also mean something

different than the worship of a false God. Jesus, therefore, must be referring to the Old Testament principle of worshiping the true God according to the God's command. Jesus is doing away with the Old Testament place of worship (the Temple), but He is not doing away with the Old Testament principle of worship (RPW).

II. The Washing of Cups – Mark 7:6-7 *"He answered and said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"*

The Pharisees and the scribes had created extra-biblical worship practices. Mark says that they washed their hands and certain vessels in a way keeping with the *"tradition of the elders"* (v.3). There is nothing morally wrong with washing hands, and yet Jesus finds fault with their actions. Jesus calls their actions "vain worship" and gives the reason for why it is vain. The worship was useless, not because it was offered to a false God, or because it was inherently sinful. God, instead, did not accept their worship because their worship was according to man's teaching, *"and in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."*

Jesus quotes Isaiah who condemned both the heart and the action. The Pharisees' hearts were not right, but they also worshiped vainly. God had never mandated this pharisaical washing ritual, but the elders created it and passed it to the next generation. The teaching, to offer God a service of hand washing, was never commanded by God and therefore it was vain.

III. Paul's Remark to the Colossians – Col 2:23 *"These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."*

Paul is referring to Jewish customs being practiced by the Colossian Christians when he says, *"these things."* The ceremonial worship of God's people in the Old Testament was the *"basic principles of the world"* (v.20). Paul calls all of these Jewish customs *"self-imposed religion."* This phrase, which consists of three English words, is actually only one word in the Greek (ἐθελοθρησκεία *ethelothraeskia*). The translation of the New King James Version could be clearer in regards to the idea of worship. The Greek word is better translated as "arbitrary worship,"⁹ "self-imposed worship,"¹⁰ or "will worship."¹¹ The word expresses, in either case, the idea that God had not commanded such activity. Man, instead, had generated the activity and performed it as an act of worship. Though the overall point of the passage is not primarily about the RPW, one can see how Paul is assuming the RPW, which was so clearly taught in the Old Testament.

IV. Commentary on the Golden Calf Episode – 1 Corinthians 10:6-7 *"Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things*

⁹ Robinson, Maurice A., William G. Pierpont, and John Jeffrey Dodson. *The Greek New Testament for beginning readers: Byzantine Textform*. Nürnberg, Germany: VTR Publications. 2010.

¹⁰ Robinson's Greek New Testament mentioned above and the New International Version.

¹¹ King James Version

as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play."'

This is an insightful passage of Scripture in regards to bringing out the RPW in the New Testament. Paul clearly forbids the Corinthians from being "*idolaters*". Notice, however, that the form of idolatry is not in reference to the worship of a false god, but rather a different type of idolatry. Verse 7 is a quote from the golden calf episode. After the Israelites made the golden calf, they worshiped the Lord by means of it and then they, "*sat down to eat, drink and rose up to play*" (Ex 32:6). Paul, therefore, is forbidding Christians from worshiping God by their own creation in the same way that Moses forbade the Israelites to worship God by their own creation. The idea is not simply the sin of making an image, for that was not merely the commandment in the Old Testament. Paul, instead is continuing the RPW as it was taught in the Old Testament. The implication is that Christians today worship God rightly when they worship Him only by His command. Christians, furthermore, commit idolatry when they worship God by any means, which He has not commanded. Any act of worship, therefore, that comes from the mind of man is idolatry.

CONCLUSION

The Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) states that God's people worship Him only by His command. Unless God commanded it, Christians do not offer it, and consequently, what worship God commands, Christians offer. The RPW is rooted in the Old Testament and continued in the New Testament. The RPW is demonstrated by direct

commands, clear inferences and plain examples. Though this essay has not presented an argument for what God has actually commanded to be done in worship¹², this essay has demonstrated how Christians should worship. When it comes to the worship of God, therefore, Christians must leave out their personal desires, and church traditions. The only thing that matters, and the only thing that God accepts, is what He has commanded. Every Christian does well to consider this exhortation from the Prophet Isaiah before they offer worship, "*Who has required this from your hand...?*" (Isaiah 1:12).

¹² The ordinary acts of worship are the reading of the Bible, the singing of praise, the preaching of the Word, the administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and Prayer.