

Scriptural Worship

By Carl W. Bogue

Officers in the Presbyterian Church take a solemn vow in which we “sincerely receive and adopt” the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms* “as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.” And yet, the vow we take and the worship we lead are often strange bedfellows. Faith and practice often lead down two different roads. It is a question of integrity that motivates this article. Although specifics are used for illustration, I am not settled on (or desirous of fighting for) all the specifics. What I care about very much is the principle involved. Do we carelessly affirm without objection our *Confession of Faith*, while ignoring the implications of that *Confession*? A case in point is the scriptural law of worship, commonly referred to as *the regulative principle of worship*.

Few would question the fact that the regulative principle of worship is systemic to our *Confession*. It is not an unimportant incidental, but it is a determinative principle of our own Reformation approach. *Sola Scriptura!* Yet I perceive that few pastors really come to grips with it in practice. We do things because we have always done them that way, or because they are “effective,” or they seem “nice” to us.

Take a sampling of worship from across the land and you will find that tradition, pragmatism, success, and even superstitions, are foundational to much worship; but rarely do we find a self-conscious submission to the Reformation principle of Scripture alone. Gordon Clark tells of a Christmas service in which a part of the so-called worship was performed by a troupe of ballet dancers. Writes Clark:

When I remarked, upon being pressed for an opinion, that ballet was a bit incongruous with divine worship, one of the ministers replied that any exercise that stimulates love of humanity is appropriate in church. Then I tried to tell him of the Puritan principle of the law of God from which we should not turn aside, either to the right hand or the left. And since this minister expatiated on love versus law, I quoted “if ye love me, keep my commandments.” But he concluded the conversation, politely enough, by saying that my viewpoint appeared legalistic to him.[Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965), p. 185.]

When Clark experienced this strange incident almost thirty years ago, it would hardly reflect what was happening in mainstream Christianity. Yet the deviations that were taking place in the liberal denominations were soon to find fertile soil to grow in separatist churches that professed a repudiation of such unbiblical innovations. In the past decade these churches are being divided by the growing promotion and practice of a plethora of questionable elements of worship with corresponding formal protests from those who believe them to be inappropriate.

In recent General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church in America, at the very same time that preaching the Word has been reduced or even eliminated in Assembly worship services, drama and dance have been practiced and promoted as elements of worship.

In the 1989 Assembly at the worship service on Sabbath morning, which service was under the auspices of the 17th G.A., elements of “drama” or “stage-play” were utilized. The Assembly did permit a “protest” to be received, but no response was given by the Assembly justifying drama in worship on Biblical grounds.

Privately I have heard: “Don't be so narrow minded!” “Drama has really been effective in many churches.” “It's entertaining; it attracts people.” “It's part of `church growth' strategy.” I even heard a version of what Gordon Clark heard, namely, that my view appears legalistic. I have NEVER heard a defender of drama in worship say: “God commands dramas or stage-plays in worship.”

More recently ballet was featured at a worship service during the General Assembly, demonstrating to the shock of many what is being practiced in various congregations within the church. This was surely controversial to concerned Presbyterians, yet knowing that, there was no attempt whatsoever to demonstrate that such a controversial element of worship was in fact prescribed in the Word of God. [While speaking on this topic in a public forum recently, I was somewhat surprised at a question asking for my response to a prominent theologian who allegedly argued that dance was a `mode' of preaching. Since all agree that preaching is a proper element of worship, then dance, if a mode of preaching, would have Biblical warrant. I confess to having wrestled with whether drama might be so considered, though to include dance seems strained at best. One at least needs to be open to the theoretical possibility of such being demonstrated. However, the seriousness with which this suggestion is made is suspect when put to the test. If drama and dance are modes of preaching, then why are women key participants in the preaching of the Word among those who strongly deny that women have a Biblical warrant to preach? If this approach to justifying dance, for example, is correct, then only preachers may do the dancing. None of the preachers I know have shown any zeal to enter the pulpit with ballet slippers.] Yet, if not prescribed by God, then it is prohibited.

We must not miss the issue here. This is not an issue of settled traditions and personal taste; this is not an issue of “modern” versus “old fashion.” The issue is the “regulative principle of worship.” Is there exegetical, Biblical warrant for drama and dance as an element of worship? Of course this must be asked of every element of worship.

The sad reality is not just the lack of Biblical warrant for drama and dance as something proper in worship, but that there seems to be among its promoters no sense of obligation to give Scriptural warrant even though they have taken vows to that effect. We may not be able to settle every exegetical debate on each element of worship, but dare we not feel the obligation to give Scriptural warrant and be so convinced in our own minds. Where pragmatism prevails over principle, there is little willingness to be in subjection to God and His Word.

The Nature of Worship

Worship is fundamental to every creature. It is extremely important. Yet the Church in general and Christians individually give all too little thought to what they do and why they do it. There is no society of people, however enlightened, that does not practice worship in some form. Paragraph 1 of chapter 21 of the *Westminster Confession* asserts this fact, and draws out the scriptural law of worship — what traditionally is called the regulative principle of worship.

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. 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.

In the following discussion, I want to note the nature of worship, the scriptural law of worship, a specific scriptural example of this principle, and subsequent results when it was violated.

The first sentence of paragraph 1 (cited above) sets the stage. What is here affirmed is that the obligation to render supreme worship and devoted service to God is a dictate of nature as well as a doctrine of special revelation. The worship of a Supreme Being is a universal instinct, and because of the sovereignty, majesty, and holiness of the Object of worship, it must be surrounded by such safeguards, restrictions, and sanctions as will preserve the divine honor and secure the acceptance of the worshipper and his worship.

Every worshipper of God needs a definite and clear understanding of what is acceptable to God. Without such a revealed standard we are like the Athenians of old, worshipping “unknown gods”! Why are we so inclined to incur God's wrath for illicit worship rather than diligently seeking and heeding divine revelation on the matter? God is holy and jealous for the purity of His worship. We, therefore, are to be watchful, lest we follow the path of Romanism into all sorts of idolatry and human inventions.

Is this not of vital concern to us? Yet it is an ideal area for stepping on toes. This is not our aim, but the questions must be asked. Is God the sovereign Lord of all? Does He reserve the right to tell us what is proper in His own house? Does He determine how we are to approach Him? Or, does He leave a margin for our intrusion?

We are very conscious of what we would readily identify as gross scriptural violations in the Roman Catholic Church, with its ceremonies and human inventions. But Protestantism is not exempt from “aids to worship” that rival the true worship of God. Although the lines have blurred, historically one can see the difference on this issue between Lutherans and Anglicans, who claim a place for rites and services which may be approved by the Church so long as they

are not forbidden by the Scriptures, and the Reformed Churches (along with their descendants) who take higher ground and claim that the line is drawn excluding everything that is not by divine appointment. In other words, what is not commanded is forbidden. Many Presbyterian and Reformed Churches have abandoned their heritage in many areas, including worship. Some Presbyterian Churches could rival the Lutherans and Episcopalians, if not Rome itself, with their robes, candles, rituals, rites, advent wreaths and manger scenes.

The nature of worship, with the eternal, all-holy God as the object, is to be protected by what Scripture alone teaches. Our *Confession* and *Catechisms* seek to honor this principle, and it is inexcusable for one who is an officer in a Presbyterian Church to be ignorant of, or to ignore, the clear teaching of our standards. Question 51 of the *Shorter Catechism*, regarding what is forbidden in the second commandment, states: "The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or by any other way not appointed in his word." Question 109 of the *Larger Catechism* says, in part, "The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself . . . all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it . . ." Therefore, the nature of worship leads us to consider the scriptural law of worship.

The Scriptural Law of Worship

We see in the second half of paragraph 1 the explicit teaching on the scriptural law of worship:

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.

We want to direct our attention to the scriptural teaching undergirding this doctrine, what is traditionally referred to as *the regulative principle of worship*. In the institution of worship, in both testaments, what God appoints alone can stand; all else is excluded. Stated another way: what God commands in worship is alone permitted.

One could expect and infer this principle from the fact that God is the great and sovereign Lord whom we worship. Such a matter of divine worship is hardly something left to the desires and inventions of men. God is Lord of His own house, which cannot have two lords or masters. "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory will I not give to another" (Isaiah 42:8). "The sovereignty, majesty, and holiness of God require that in all matters pertaining to our approach to Him in holy worship, it is His to command and ours to obey." [William H. Vincent, "the Scriptural Law of Worship," in *The Psalms in Worship*, John McNaugher, ed. (Pittsburgh: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1907.), p. 24. This quote summarizes the argument of Vincent's article, which was most helpful. Cf. especially pages 25 - 27 for a compact summary of

Biblical examples in this matter.] God is God; there is none other! Scripture carefully prescribes provisions to safeguard against human intrusions into God's realm.

The sacredness of this trust, the gravity of violation, is impressed upon us in many places in the holy Scripture, but especially in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 4:1-2, God gives His firm command in general:

Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

If we see what follows, especially verses 13-19, we see worship is a part of what God has in view. Notice especially verse 19: "And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven." The great King and Head of the Church is a jealous Lord. He tolerates no rivals. In Deuteronomy 12, God is much involved in giving details for worship. And in Deuteronomy 12:32, He gives a fitting conclusion: "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it."

Such assertions are not absent from the New Testament. Christ strongly rebukes the Pharisees for their humanistic traditions (see Mark 7:1-3; Matthew 15:1-9). In Colossians 2, Paul gives us the well-known attack upon "will-worship." In verse 16 and following, Paul speaks of holy days, festivals, and the like. He deals with a prominent heresy of his day, namely Gnosticism, which saw matter as evil and thus spiritualized everything. From this outlook came a strong emphasis on asceticism and monasticism. Then, moving to Colossians 2:23, we see what the inspired apostle concludes: "Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh." "Appearance of wisdom" — much worship appears pious, but it is appearance only, because it is "self-imposed religion." It is not commanded by God, but self-imposed. The King James version translates it, "will-worship."

"Will-worship" is an excellent phrase to remember, for that is what it is — worship of one's own will. Man tries to become God and decides what is worship. It is a form of idolatry, whether in the restricted area of worship, or the broader area, as is prevalent today under the name of humanism, i.e., man as the measure of all things. In such cases, man worships the creature rather than the Creator; and God condemns it. God commands how He will be worshipped. We are not to add to or take away!

There is a corollary which is generally understood in any law, namely, that when something is commanded the opposite is forbidden. The sixth commandment states that you shall not murder. The opposite is the double negative: you shall not, not protect life — i.e., do all you can

to protect life. So when the command says, “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve,” it also prohibits the giving of worship to any other. The worship of the sun, the moon, the stars, the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, or any of the saints, is all cast out with one divine command. The command to worship God covers it all; all other worship is wrong. The fundamental point, however, is on the prohibition of whatever is not commanded. Not just things contrary to the Word, but even apparently neutral things. Jesus condemned the tradition of the Pharisees, not always because it contradicted divine law, but because it was in addition to it.

The line between neutral and contrary is often blurred. Rome justifies many of her perversions on the grounds that they are not contrary to the Word. Worship of the Virgin Mary, confession to a priest, paying money to get one out of purgatory, sale of indulgences to cover sin, and a legion of other heresies are argued on such grounds. Even if some such things are not forbidden (which is rarely the case), the plea to permit in worship what is not forbidden is a Trojan horse filled with disaster. It was said that John Newton was a great lover of cats. Once he possessed a mother cat and a kitten. To aid the cats and keep down his own interruptions, he had two holes cut in the door — one for the old cat, and a smaller one for the kitten.[Vincent, p. 28.] It had not occurred to him that the hole that would admit the larger cat would also admit the kitten; indeed, it would not only admit two cats, but any number of cats.

When you make an opening in the door of God's house large enough to admit divided chancels, candles to aid worship, holy days and seasons such as Ash Wednesday (dare I say Easter and Christmas?), that same hole is likely in time to admit the worship of the Virgin Mary, prayers to St. Peter, confession to a priest, holy water, kissing the Pope's toe, and a whole host of pollutions and monstrosities from which the Church, by God's grace, escaped in the great revival of biblical Christianity during the Reformation of the sixteenth century.[Ibid. It should be noted that Vincent includes the singing of anything but Psalms in with the violations of the regulative principle. That particular is not the focus of this paper, although the principle involved is. Each particular must be determined on exegetical and hermeneutical grounds.]

The great principle spelled out in paragraph 21:1 of our *Confession*, that only what is commanded has a place in worship, is one of the great cornerstones of the Reformation. Without this principle it is doubtful whether “Protestantism” would ever have broken the Roman bondage. I see nothing in Scripture, or, for that matter, in sanctified common sense, that should cause us to waver in the least from the regulative principle of worship as set forth so clearly in this paragraph.

Before moving to the next point, a question and a tentative application emerge. It is a question we must take seriously. If God has spoken, can we but obey? Not what seems right to me, but what does God say?

My struggle is very real and personal. I am convicted of things now that I was unaware of several years ago. That struggle comes in application and the ramifications of our applications. How do we change a long-standing tradition if we are convinced it is wrong? Suddenly, or

gradually? Your congregation will ask: “Why is it wrong now, but it was acceptable last week or last year?” My plea and my question are matters of principle. Are we prepared to take Scripture seriously, wherever it leads us?

Let me suggest a couple of examples that some may never have taken seriously. The first concerns Christmas. Where in Scripture are we commanded to incorporate the celebration of Jesus' birthday as an annual integral part of worship? You will find a lot of tradition, but zero exegesis.

On the basis of scriptural teaching, as reflected in paragraph 21:1 of the *Confession*, I wish there were no intrusions at all in worship which promote the celebration of “holidays” such as Christmas (or Christmass as it was originated in Roman error). I struggle with whether I may purposely coincide an incarnation related exposition of Scripture with the day when men wrongly imagine to do so is somehow a sacred obligation. So also with Easter — named, I might add, after the pagan goddess of spring! To preach and sing about the birth and the resurrection of Christ is certainly proper worship. Celebration of Christmas and Easter as annual holy days is not. My battle is whether my saying so is enough, or whether my preaching topic gives the appearance of condoning what is wrong.

But here is a challenge for you as a worshipper. You come to worship on that Sunday in December that is considered to be “Christmas Sunday.” We sing three or four non-Messianic Psalms, including Psalm 83, which praises God for utterly wiping out His enemies; and I preach an expository sermon on demon possession, or on 2 Samuel 21 and the execution of Saul's grandsons. Would you feel cheated? Would you feel as if you had not really worshipped? Would it seem less spiritual to you? Would you be embarrassed for the guest you brought for an expected Christmas worship service? If that is so, I suggest you have a serious spiritual problem and are in need of repentance and serious rethinking about worship.

The other example concerns our Covenanter friends. They sing exclusively Psalms in worship. The average Presbyterian would be horrified to think he couldn't sing “The Old Rugged Cross” or “I Come to the Garden.” My challenge to you is to know why you disagree, if you do! Is it because of will worship, i.e., you will decide how you worship God? Or is it because you are convinced God in His Word commands you to sing man-inspired hymns?

We say we agree with them about the regulative principle, that only what God commands is permitted. But I fear many Presbyterian pastors and elders have never really brought their practice to the touchstone of Scripture. They sing hymns for the same reason Roman Catholics cross themselves and have statues of Mary and the saints. Their tradition instills it, and it feels worshipful to them. That is not a valid reason. Does God command it? We do exclusive Psalm-singers a grave injustice if we put them down in a way that makes our affirmation of the *Catechisms* and *Confession* hypocrisy.

An exclusive Psalm-singer can tell you why he is in terms of the *Westminster Confession*, 21:1. My challenge to you is that you had better join with him unless or until you can justify non-

Psalms in a way consistent with the regulative principle. Anything less is will-worship. God says: "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

A Biblical Example

Let us now consider an example from God's Word, specifically an example that underscores God's displeasure with those who violate His law of worship. It is perhaps the most dramatic example of all: Nadab and Abihu and the lesson of "strange fire." It is a lesson we should never forget.

"Strange fire" has specific reference to Leviticus 10: 1-2:

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.

From this event, let us consider five aspects: (1) the setting, (2) the sin, (3) the sincerity, (4) the successors, and (5) the sophistry.

(1.) The Setting.

First consider the setting. In moving from Leviticus chapter 9 to 10, we have a melancholy transition from a scene of high, festive, but holy rejoicing, to a scene of awful judgment and heart-rending sorrow. The tabernacle had been finished. Aaron and his four sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazer, and Ithamar had been consecrated to the priesthood. The sacrifices had been prepared. Moses and Aaron had solemnly blessed the congregation. The divine requirements had been complied with; and attesting to God's acceptance of their services, His glory had appeared to all the people with fire from heaven miraculously descending upon the altar and kindling a flame never to be quenched. God was pleased and so gave testimony. In the midst of this solemn and holy occasion, when all the assembled host were bowing before the Lord in joyous worship, an act of rash, presumptuous sacrilege on the part of Nadab and Abihu occurred; and in a moment the scene turned from one of worship to one of woe. Scarcely had the heavenly fire come down in mercy to consume the sacrifice, when it again descended to consume the sacrificers. The words were few, but of fearful and solemn significance. The enormity of their sin is seen in the punishment which immediately came upon them. They were struck dead with their firepans in their hands, without a moment of warning. That is the setting.

(2.) The Sin.

Secondly, we need to be clear about the sin! What was the essence of their sin? Several commentators mention aspects that may be part and parcel to their sin. But there is agreement

as to the primary sin which was so displeasing to Jehovah. They sinned by offering strange fire before the Lord. Verse 1 tells us they each took a censer, or firepan. A firepan was a vessel for carrying live coals. The priest would put the coals in the pan and sprinkle them with the frankincense, in order to create an agreeable aroma in the sanctuary. Profane fire was offered in those firepans, i.e., fire other than that which the Lord had commanded. God sent a supernatural fire to consume the first sacrifice offered to Him. This fire was to be kept perpetually alive, and from it only were coals to be taken for the burning of incense. This was what God commanded as part of their worship. This procedure is specified, for example, in Leviticus 16:12: "Then he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from the altar before the LORD, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil."

You see the point emerging: the *regulative principle*! It was not that God had specifically forbidden other fires to be used. The issue is His appointment of a particular fire, and the conclusion is that whatever is not commanded is therefore forbidden. Many professing Christians would no doubt be offended at such a restriction. After all, all they did was worship God in a way He had not commanded, not in a way He had explicitly forbidden. Why should it matter where the fire came from? So they used fire of their own making! It would probably burn as brightly and consume the incense just as well. No doubt many would say, "It is just as good." But it lacked the peculiar mark of sanctity. It was not of God's appointment; it was not divine fire. If you can understand the nature of their sin, then everything else will fall into place. If you miss what was wrong with their fire, you will fight every conclusion along the way. Was God displeased? Was their act sin? As a mighty judgment, fire from heaven, like a blazing bolt of lightning, consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Whether it was in a way not commanded, or at a time not commanded, or in a place not commanded, the key point is this: it was not commanded, and therefore it was wrong. They had intruded a merely human device into holy things, thus usurping God's prerogative, and they died for their sin! One could leave it there, but there are at least three more things we need to understand.

(3.) The Sincerity.

We should consider, thirdly, the presumed sincerity of Nadab and Abihu. We are not told, but I would imagine they meant well in what they did. It may have seemed to them the right thing to do. After such a marvellous display of God's power as they had witnessed, why not, as a token of reverence and adoration, offer incense in the most immediate presence of Jehovah? Why should minor variations from God's appointment as to the manner, time, or place matter very much — so long as they were sincere, and their motive was worship? Is that not the way our minds would work? Nevertheless, their motive and sincerity made no difference. Fire from heaven consumed them. Good intentions do not stop God's judgment on disobedience. In fact, if we can infer anything from this incident, it is the added responsibility of those in authority and privilege. Nadab and Abihu had so recently been consecrated to the priesthood. They were sons, indeed the two eldest sons, of Aaron the high priest. They were honored men in Israel. They accompanied Moses and their father to the summit of the holy mountain and were favored with a vision of God such as mortal eyes had never seen. None of the 70 elders who went are mentioned by name, but Exodus 24 expressly designates Moses and Aaron, Nadab

and Abihu. Now they had just been assisting their father and Moses in the sacred offerings. They were at the summit. Yet amidst it all, they sinned. And the gravity of their sin may not be dismissed because of their sincerity.

(4.) The Successors.

A fourth and important consideration for us concerns the successors of this sin. The particular sin of Nadab and Abihu can never be repeated now. But as to its inner nature and essence it is perhaps the most common sin in all ages. For the essence of their sin was what Paul, in Colossians 2, calls will-worship, or self-made religion. They did not consult the revealed will of God regarding the way in which He would be served, but their own fancy and inclination, what “seemed good” to them. God's directions were full and explicit; but Nadab and Abihu apparently imagined that the fragrance of their incenses, and its intrinsic suitableness to express their good intentions, were sufficient to let them neglect strict obedience to the revealed will of God regarding worship.

King Uzziah is another man in history who sought to worship God in his own way. King Uzziah entered the temple to burn incense before the Lord. That he was king was now irrelevant. The priests were horrified, and 80 of them rushed in after him and opposed him, saying, “It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto the LORD, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary; for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from the LORD God” (2 Chronicles 26:18). The king was offended to think his worship was not acceptable to God. Enraged, he persisted, and sacred Scripture tells us that God caused a leprosy to appear on his forehead. “They thrust him out from thence; yea, himself hastened also to go out, because the Lord had smitten him” (verse 20). The king was a leper to the day of his death. For any one, even the king, to intrude into the temple, and thus add to God's command, was an offense to God; and God showed His displeasure.

When Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire and were slain, Moses told Aaron it was the Lord who spoke in judgment. Leviticus 10:3 states: “Then Moses said to Aaron, This is it that the LORD spake, saying: `I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified.’”

In all ages men have been prone to commit this same sin. It is true in the New Testament dispensation the Lord has left more freedom within worship than in the detailed ritual of Old Testament ceremonies. It is also true that there will always be differences among faithful Bible-believing Christians who seek God's honor. Exegetical questions, questions of liberty, and how far such liberty extends are necessary questions. But this much is clear: wherever we lack clear divine warrant for what we do in the worship of God, we need to be exceedingly careful lest, like Nadab and Abihu, we be guilty of offering “strange fire” which the Lord has not commanded. Go into a typical place of worship today, and you will see a multitude of remarkable devices and practices by which, it is imagined, the worship and adoration of God are furthered. The generation of Nadab and Abihu is not extinct. Will-worship, self-made

religion, has confused the commands of God with the practices and traditions of man. Nadabs are numerous; Abihus abound. Their successors are in control, although God has never changed His law.

(5.) The Sophistry.

This brings us somewhat naturally to our last point, namely, the sophistry associated with this debate. Sophistry is a word coined in reference to the Sophists of the fifth century before Christ, a school of philosophers that were more concerned with their clever use of reason than they were with truth. Their skill was in using reason to win an argument by deceiving their less able opponents. It was not true reason, but a subtle deception, and thus when people use what seems reasonable to convince one of an untruth, it is called sophistry.

The deception goes like this: Is God's law still in effect? That is, may we not do these extras now? And they answer, no, we are free from the law. Or perhaps they will reason that God does not regard it as a serious offense, otherwise we would see such judgments every day as happened to Nadab and Abihu. You see the deception! How many use it in practice every day.

Because they don't see God's judgment, they are at peace. But because those who offend God do not reap the punishment immediately is no proof that God has ceased to hold men accountable for intruding on holy ground and offering strange fire. One judgment of this kind gives us a warning for all time. Because all liars are not struck dead for their prevarications, as were Annanias and Sapphira, is no indication that God has ceased to hate lying. One swift, terrible judgment like that should suffice for all time and give us some idea as well about the everlasting punishment for such, when all debts are truly settled. One example of Nadab and Abihu should be clear. "But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew. 15:9).

Some would react strongly against the practices of Rome. Others might be offended when pizza and Pepsi are substituted for the bread and wine in the Lord's supper. But some of these same critics think a white rose dipped in water is a nice aid to the sacrament of baptism, or that a proliferation of symbols and candles aids them in a more spiritual worship. There are advent wreaths and alleged pictures of Jesus. Where was the line drawn? What other than will-worship makes symbolic candles upon the communion table (misnamed altar) differ from Nadab and Abihu's strange fire? You decide one thing; Rome decides another; and Nadab and Abihu do their thing. There is only one way for those who would worship God in a way acceptable to Him. Do what He commands alone. Do not add to it, or take away from it. That is the regulative principle of worship. What God thinks of those who violate it is clear in Leviticus 10:1-3.

A Concluding Hypothetical Example

I want to conclude with a hypothetical example. Like the text from Leviticus, the example pertains to the clergy. But this should not distract us from the fact that every creature is responsible for purity before God, and my error is no excuse for your participation in sin. All of us must one day give account before God for our actions.

This is my example. It is hypothetical. It is valid to the degree that it reflects accurately God's Word. It may well be offensive to some. But I hope it will vividly set forth the application of Leviticus 10:1-3, and the teaching of 21:1 of the *Confession*.

A young man, well-schooled, was ordained to the gospel ministry. His father and grandfather were both pastors before him. It was a joyous day when he was ordained and called to his first congregation. The following Lord's day, his first in his new congregation, there was a great spirit of excitement among his flock. The church had lost its vitality. Membership was down. Maybe the answer was the new shepherd.

The pastor was equally motivated and desirous of seeing revival within the congregation. The congregation sang vigorously, the pastoral prayer was well-organized and reflected well what the congregational prayer should be. The sermon was a powerful exposition of the Word, giving evidence of study and ability. Then at the close of the sermon, the pastor declared that there was something missing in the congregation's worship, something which he would institute this very first Sunday as a regular part of their worship service, something which has blessed many congregations and brought revival and success to dead churches.

"Right now, and every Sunday," the young man said, "we will have an invitation, an altar call, and the unsaved will be invited to come forward to receive Christ."

The congregation stirred momentarily from its lethargy, and thought to itself, "How clever and zealous is our new pastor!"

"This is what I want you to do right now," the pastor said. "Get up and come to the front. Don't let distance keep you from Jesus Christ. If you want to receive Jesus Christ, the way to do it is to come forward."

And before the organ could even begin to play "Just As I Am," fire came down from heaven and consumed him. The father and grandfather were both present for their son's first service. As they came forward to carry his body from the front of the sanctuary, the congregation as one remembered the words which Moses said to Aaron in Leviticus 10:3. "This is it that the LORD spake, saying, 'I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before the people I will be glorified.'"

Perhaps nothing will make my point clearer than to say, to anyone offended by this example, the option is not tolerance. If the example is wrong and Scripture does command such

invitations as part of worship, then any pastor not making such an “altar call” is sinning as clearly as if the sermon or prayer were being deleted. This same rationale would apply to issues such as Christmas and Easter or drama and dance. As Iain Murray has stated with such clarity, [Iain H. Murray, *The Invitation System* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), p. 11.] “If the evangelist’s choice in employing ‘the invitation’ is an optional one it cannot have scriptural evidence to warrant it, for in that case the evangelical preacher would be under an obligation and have no option.”

But further, if you say it is an option without scriptural warrant, you have repudiated 21:1 of the *Confession*.

My plea is for a confessional church to take its *Confession* seriously. If the principle is correct, we must either have or not have the various particulars on the basis of scriptural warrant. If it is “optional,” it is prohibited.

For Further Reading

Books on The Regulative Principle and Worship.

“Discretionary Power of the Church,” John L. Girardeau, *An Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature*, volume 3, #4 (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1990).

A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies, George Gillespie (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1993). New Edition.

“Reasons Against Festival Days” (Extract from *Perth Assembly*, 1619), David Calderwood, *An Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature*, volume 3, #3 (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1990).

Seeing Jesus, The Case Against Pictures of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Peter Barnes (Banner of Truth, 1990).

Worship in the Presence of God, Frank J. Smith & David C. Lachman, editors (Greenville: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press, 1992)

On Psalmody.

Psalm-Singing in Scripture and History, Rowland Ward (Melbourne, 1985).

The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God, G. I. Williamson (Belfast: The Covenanter Bookshop, nd).

The Psalms in Worship, John McNaugher, ed. (Pittsburgh: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1907.) Rpt. Still Waters Revival Books, 1992.

The Songs of Zion, Michael Bushell (Crown and Covenant, 1980).

“The True Psalmody; or, The Bible Psalms the Church's only Manual of Praise,” *Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature*, vol. 4 (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1991).

Scriptural Worship

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