THE HEART OF THE MAGISTERIAL DIVIDE
Calvin, Luther, and the Regulative Principle of Worship

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Shortly after the dawn of the Reformation, two branches of Protestant thought took shape:\(^1\) the “Lutheranism” of Martin Luther and the “Calvinism”\(^2\) of John Calvin. Luther had agreed with Calvin’s predecessor, Ulrich Zwingli, on fourteen and a half of fifteen articles at the Marburg Colloquy in 1529. However, the attempt to unify the Reformation cause had failed on account of their disagreement over the nature of the Lord’s Supper. It became the focus of attention and the topic of vociferous debate, yet the Lord’s Supper was not the only significant point of divergence within the Protestant ranks.

Though it was not debated at Marburg, these Reformers also differed in their view of worship. Calvin declared lawful worship only to be that which had been prescribed by God, and he rejected all other modes of worship. This conviction has been entitled the regulative principle of worship (RPW). Conversely, Luther’s understanding “may be called a ‘normative principle’ – general norms are given but whatever is not expressly forbidden by Scripture in worship is permitted.”\(^3\) This massive distinction set these Reformers and their followers on two completely different trajectories with regard to worship. Despite the fact that the Lord’s Supper occupied “center stage” of the debate at Marburg, almost five hundred years of history has shown that the heart of the Magisterial divide was and is, in reality, the understanding and application of the RPW. This variance in the doctrine of worship has wreaked havoc and significantly weakened the modern church by causing a great divergence in the worship practices of those who uphold the RPW as Calvin did and those who do not.

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\(^1\) The discussion at hand is in reference to the “Magisterial Reformers” only. The ideas and beliefs of the Anabaptists, who also became known as the “Radical Reformers,” are not under consideration, because they were not regarded as a Protestant branch of the Reformation. See N. R. Needham, *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: Renaissance and Reformation* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 2010), 253.

\(^2\) Calvin’s theological legacy is often referred to as “Reformed Theology.”

THE HEART OF WORSHIP

Many argue that Calvin and Luther were divided on the topic of worship insofar as Calvin promoted the “regulative principle” and Luther advocated the “normative principle.” However, they were not as divided as it may appear. While it is true that they experienced a divergence in worship practice,4 they were, at least on the surface, unified in principle (i.e., theological conviction). Both argued that it is God’s prerogative alone to prescribe worship. In this sense, they together championed the RPW. Through their dynamic teaching and writing, Martin Luther and John Calvin served to advance the RPW by stressing four facets of it.

First, they clearly denounced human inventions in worship. In fact, they maintained that all human developments not commanded by God should be abandoned. In the Smalcald Articles (1537), Luther writes, “[Masses] are a purely human invention. They are not commanded by God. And we can discard all human inventions, for Christ says, ‘In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men’ [Matthew 15:9].”5 Just as Luther urged believers to beware of them, Calvin spoke sharply in reference to all man-made innovations in worship: “Yet we see how the Spirit loathes this insolence solely because the inventions of men in the worship of God are impure corruptions.”6 Calvin likewise quotes Matthew 15:9 in denunciation of mingling man-made innovations with divine commands and regards the RPW as a safeguard against doing so: “a part of the reverence that is paid to him consists simply in worshiping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of our own.”7 With reference to Colossians 2:23,8 he calls

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4 The reasons for this divergence is discussed in the section entitled “The Heart of the Distinction.”
5 Martin Luther, “Smalcald Articles,” in Denis R. Janz, ed., A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 123.
worship that has not been prescribed by God “will worship.” He argues that God alone is wise and that we must become fools, because the minds of men can only produce carnal and meaningless things. ⁹ He concludes that all counterfeit worship in the church was condemned⁴⁰ and “nothing so much offended [God] as being worshiped by humanly devised rites.”⁴¹

Second, they advocated sola Scriptura in worship. Luther declares that the Word of God is the sole criterion for judging all that the church fathers taught, as well as all precepts and ordinances. He states, “I want to see whether any doctrine concurs with Christ.”⁴² He fought for the sufficiency of Scripture, believing that one should hold fast to Christ’s teachings alone and beware of all innovations. Similarly, Calvin argues that God is the sole lawgiver; He alone rules in perfect righteousness and holiness and has authority over souls through the mediation of Scripture.⁴³ He argues that “the Word of God is the test which discriminates between his true worship and that which is false and vitiated.”⁴⁴

Third, Luther and Calvin insisted that Christ did not teach more or less than that which is necessary. Luther writes, “I am to agree with Christ. For I am to adhere to Christ alone; He has taught neither too much nor too little.”⁴⁵ He lists monks, nuns, pilgrimages, and the invocation of saints as examples and argues that Christ’s teaching is above that of church fathers and all

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⁸ Colossians 2:23 KJV, “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.”
¹⁰ Ibid., 2:1190 (4.10.11).
¹¹ Ibid., 2:1196 (4.10.17).
¹⁵ Luther, “Liberation from Human Authority,” 31.
others, even angels (Galatians 1:8).\textsuperscript{16} Luther argues that Deuteronomy 12:32\textsuperscript{17} “gives us liberty and absolves us of all works, efforts, laws, and traditions of men; and it binds our consciences to the Word of God alone.”\textsuperscript{18} Calvin likewise quotes Deuteronomy 12:32 to demonstrate that the church should never pass the bounds of God’s Word: “There is nothing involved, nothing obscure, nothing ambiguous in these words which forbid the church universal to add to or take away anything from God’s Word, when the worship of the Lord and precepts of salvation are concerned.”\textsuperscript{19} Furthermore, these Reformers staunchly asserted that no one ought to accept instruction that is at variance with the gospel or that adds or subtracts from the pure doctrine of God’s Word. To prove this assertion, they both cite Deuteronomy 4:2,\textsuperscript{20} which contains the injunction to never add or take away from God’s commands. Commenting on this passage, Luther writes, “In one short expression this passage condemns all human laws, and it decrees that in a matter of conscience nothing but the Law and Word of God is valid.”\textsuperscript{21} Calvin similarly argues that the Lord “forbade anything to be added to his Word or taken away from it.”\textsuperscript{22}

Fourth, Luther and Calvin supported the RPW by asserting that mere men have sin natures and can err. They agreed that the condemnation of all human laws and validation of God’s Word as the only legitimate director of the conscience ought to be evident, because human beings have inherited spiritual blindness and depravity from Adam.\textsuperscript{23} Luther writes:

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  \item \textsuperscript{16} Galatians 1:8, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” Note, all Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the NASB translation, 1995.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Deuteronomy 12:32, “Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it.”
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Martin Luther, \textit{Luther’s Works: Lectures on Deuteronomy}, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1960), 9:125.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, 2:1195 (4.10.17).
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Deuteronomy 4:2, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.”
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Luther, \textit{Luther’s Works: Lectures on Deuteronomy}, 9:50. See also Luther, “Liberation from Human Authority,” 32.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, 2:1162 (4.8.13).
\end{itemize}
For since through the sin of Adam we are sunk in blindness, so that we are wholly ignorant of God in all His will and counsel, it is not only foolish but also impossible of ourselves to prepare a light and a way by which to approach God and find out what He would have us do … All this He commands in order that in the worship of God the people may not be carried away by its own feeling, however holy and good, but may be governed by the Word … whatever we attempt without the Word is sheer darkness and error.24

Calvin also strongly asserts the depravity of the human mind by rhetorically asking, “For what could men’s mind produce but all carnal and fatuous things which truly resemble their authors?”25 He argues that “such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions.”26

**THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY**

In principle, Luther and Calvin agreed that God fully regulates worship by His Word. However, the two Reformers applied the principle quite differently. To understand how they arrived at their practices, one must first comprehend the source of their divergence. Despite their many agreements, these two men disagreed about what makes up the very heart (i.e., central tenet) of the Christian faith, and this disagreement set them on separate trajectories.

The former Catholic monk Martin Luther came to the firm conviction that a man is justified by faith alone – a belief which came to be known as *sola fide*. In fact, Luther was so impacted by the doctrine that he called justification “the article upon which the church stands or falls.”27 As the Lord began to open his eyes to the truth of Scripture, “he wrestled with the problem of developing a whole new perspective of religion in which justification, Christ, and

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24 Luther, *Luther’s Works: Lectures on Deuteronomy*, 9:51, 123, 125.
Him Crucified, would occupy the central place.”

This wrestling resulted in overemphasizing *sola fide* to the extent that he considered it to be the chief criterion for the canonization of Scripture; he even used it to question the canonicity of the epistle of James. In the Smalcald Articles (1537), Luther labeled the Catholic mass as “the greatest and most horrible abomination because it runs into direct and violent conflict with this fundamental article [i.e., justification by faith].” Accordingly, then, for Luther “the main problem with papal rites and ceremonies was that they were compulsory and considered necessary for salvation.”

Though Calvin also highly valued *sola fide*, his focus moved beyond it to the purity of worship. He argues that “it certainly is the part of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul,” and he describes his own conversion as a rescue from idolatry, rather than merely liberation from works-righteousness. Calvin prioritized worship over salvation. He writes:

> [The] following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity, viz., a knowledge, first, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, secondly of the source from which salvation is to be obtained. When these are kept out of view, though we may glory in the name of Christians, our profession is empty and vain.

Calvin was serious enough about the purity of worship to argue that the Reformation itself was required for this reason: “God in many passages forbids any new worship unsanctioned by his Word; since he declares that he is grievously offended with the presumption which invents such

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30 Luther, “Smalcald Articles,” 122.
32 John Calvin to James Sadolet, in Calvin, *Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, 1:34.
34 Godfrey, “Calvin and the Worship of God,” 32.
35 Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” 1:126.
worship … it is clear that the Reformation which we have introduced was demanded by a strong necessity.”

At the most fundamental level, the Lutheran and Calvinist (a.k.a. “Reformed”) branches of the Reformation found a difference in their focus. Terry Johnson sums it up well: “For Luther and the Lutherans the focus was justification … But for Zwingli, Calvin, and the ‘Reformed’ stream, the focus … was worship … For Lutherans the enemy of faith was works. For the Reformed, the enemy of faith was idolatry.” Thus, even if the Magisterial Reformers would have agreed on the Lord’s Supper, they would have inevitably divided into Lutheran and Calvinist/Reformed parties due to this significant variance.

**THE HEART OF THE LAW**

Even though they disagreed on what makes up the core of Christianity, Luther and Calvin both believed that the principal teaching of the faith is embodied and emphasized in the Decalogue. Not surprisingly, their divergent views regarding the essence of true religion were manifested in their differing exposition of Exodus 20:3-6. Before examining their differing expositions on these verses, it is helpful to consider their understanding of the overall structure of the Decalogue.

Perhaps the division of the Ten Commandments is the most obvious manifestation of the difference between the two Reformers. Luther was satisfied to retain the Catholic division of the Decalogue wherein the prohibition against having other gods (Exodus 20:3) and the prohibition

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36 Ibid., 1:152-153.
38 See previous section. Luther saw the principal teaching as justification by faith alone and Calvin saw it as worship.
39 Exodus 20:3, “You shall have no other gods before Me.”
against idolatry (vv. 4-6) are combined as the First Commandment, and the commands given in Exodus 20:17 are divided into the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. Calvin, on the other hand, was convinced that what Luther and the Catholic Church considered as the First Commandment was, in actuality, the first two commandments. Calvin writes,

Those who so divide them as to give three precepts to the First Table and relegate the remaining seven to the Second, erase from the number the commandment concerning images, or at least hide it under the First. There is no doubt that the Lord gave it a distinct place as a commandment, yet they absurdly tear in two the Tenth Commandment about not coveting the possessions of one’s neighbor.

As a result of his decision to rely on exegesis of the text instead of tradition and to support his argument with history, Calvin concluded that the First Commandment consists of the prohibition against having other gods (Exodus 20:3), whereas the Second Commandment contains the prohibition against idolatry (vv. 4-6). Calvin also understood the Tenth Commandment to include all of the related prohibitions against coveting found in Exodus 20:17, so he saw no need to divide the verse into two commandments.

Luther and Calvin both strongly emphasized Exodus 20:3-6 but did so in significantly different ways. Their exposition of these verses had a substantial impact on their understanding

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40 Exodus 20:4-6, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. 5 “You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, 6 but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

41 Some mistakenly assume that Luther (and the Catholic Church) altogether removed Exodus 20:4-6 from the Decalogue. Although it may appear this way in Luther’s Small Catechism, because he quotes Exodus 20:3 as the First Commandment, it is assumed that verses 4-6 are included as well, due to the catechetical summary format.

42 Exodus 20:17, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

43 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house (20:17a) was assumed to be the ninth commandment, and the remainder of the verse was assumed to be the tenth.


45 Calvin’s division of the Decalogue became known as the “Protestant division.”
of the Decalogue, as well as their overall theology. For Luther, all of the commandments are illuminated by Exodus 20:3-6. Pertaining to these verses, Luther writes:

And because this commandment is the very first of all commandments and the highest and the best, [the one] from which all others proceed, in which they exist and by which they are judged and assessed, so its work (that is, the faith or confidence that God is gracious at all times) is the very first, highest, and best from which all others must proceed, in which they must exist and abide, and by which they must be judged and assessed.

Calvin believed that, “God has so divided his law into two parts, which contain the whole of righteousness” and “what they [i.e., those who divide the Commandments into three in the first table and seven in the second table] take as the First Commandment [i.e., Exodus 20:3-6] should occupy the place of the preface to the whole law.” Thus we observe that “because of the importance which Luther and Calvin both placed upon [Exodus 20:3-6], their interpretation [of these verses] guides much of their hermeneutic for the rest of the Bible.”

Regarding the exposition of these verses, Luther argues that the First Commandment (vv. 3-6) teaches that “You shall have no other gods” and means that “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” He emphasizes fully relying on God alone and contends that the “intent of this commandment is to require true faith and trust of the heart with respect to the only true God.” Thus, Luther understood the thrust of the commandment to be sola fide. In his “Treatise on Good Works” (1520), Luther explains, “this faith, this trust, this confidence from the heart’s core is the true fulfilling of the first commandment.” Luther’s decision to embrace

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48 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1:377 (2.8.11).
49 Ibid., 1:378 (2.8.12).
50 Price, “A Comparative Analysis of John Calvin and Martin Luther Concerning the First and Second Commandments,” 69.
52 Martin Luther, Luther's Large Catechism, trans. J.N. Lenker (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967), 10.
the Catholic structure of the two tables of the Law and to subsume the Second Commandment under the First was not without consequence. Price correctly argues, “Because Luther understands the First Commandment to deal primarily with one having other gods, he relegates the pertinent topic of images or icons and does not deal directly with them in the Treatise … Because Luther is adopting the Catholic delineation of the Decalogue, he does not see the subject of idols as the central message of the First Commandment.”⁵⁴ Given this, the extent of Luther’s exposition of the Decalogue with regard to idolatry is cast in terms of misplaced faith – looking for blessing, help, and comfort apart from God. Luther concludes: “[Idolatry] consists chiefly in the state of a heart that is intent on something else.”⁵⁵

Calvin also promoted genuine faith in God, but he once again pushed beyond the singular focus of Luther. For Calvin, “the Decalogue … may be thought of as a textbook for right worship.”⁵⁶ It not only commands us regarding who to worship; it also keeps us from idolatry by informing us how to worship. Calvin’s partition of the First and Second Commandments flows naturally out of his exegesis of the text:

“In the First Commandment, after He had taught who was the true God, He commanded that He alone should be worshipped; and now He defines what is His LEGITIMATE WORSHIP. Now, since these are two distinct things, we conclude that the commandments are also distinct, in which different things are treated … it would not be sufficient for us to be instructed to worship Him alone, unless we also knew the manner in which He would be worshipped.”⁵⁷

Luther’s focus concerning Exodus 20:3-6 was on true faith in God; Calvin’s was on the true worship of God. Since God is sovereign, He alone has the authority to define and demand such worship. Calvin reasons, “The purpose of [the first] commandment is that the Lord wills

⁵⁴ Price, “A Comparative Analysis of John Calvin and Martin Luther Concerning the First and Second Commandments,” 64.
⁵⁵ Luther, Luther’s Large Catechism, 12-13.
alone to be pre-eminent among his people, and to exercise complete authority over them.”

Speaking of the Second Commandment, he writes, “In the previous commandment, he declared
himself the one God, apart from whom no other gods are to be imagined or had. Now he
declares more openly what sort of God he is, and with what kind of worship he should be
honored, lest we dare attribute anything carnal to him.” Luther’s exegesis did not lead him to
address idolatry beyond misplaced faith. Calvin, however, mined much more from the text. He
saw idolatry as a synecdoche (i.e., the part for the whole) for “all fictitious services which men in
their ingenuity have invented.” This distinction had a considerable impact on Luther’s and
Calvin’s practice of worship.

THE HEART OF THE DISTINCTION

Martin Luther and John Calvin both believed the Decalogue to be essential for knowing
how to properly love God and man, yet their conclusions and applications from it regarding
worship were drastically different. Luther “held that the Church might warrantably introduce
innovations into its government and worship, which might seem fitted to be useful, provided it
could not be shown that there was anything in Scripture which expressly prohibited or
discountenanced them,” whereas Calvin believed that “nothing should be introduced into the
government and worship of the Church, unless a positive warrant for it could be found in
Scripture.” These conclusions are rooted in and flow out of their understanding of the principal
teaching of Scripture. Luther’s preeminent concern with sola fide and emphasis on the gospel

58 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1:382 (2.8.16).
59 Ibid., 1:383 (2.8.17).
60 Calvin, Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, 2:107.
61 William Cunningham, “The Reformers and the Regulative Principle,” in Murray, Iain, ed., The
Reformation of the Church, 38.
62 Ibid.
resulted in “concern for the external forms of worship as secondary.”  

By contrast, Calvin, who picked up where Zwingli left off, desired to “bring all of life under the authority of God’s will revealed in Scripture.” Since Luther saw faith in Christ as the ultimate expression of the Decalogue, and Calvin believed that worship lies at the heart of the Commandments, Calvin indirectly charged Luther and his followers with erasing “the commandment concerning images, or at least [hiding] it under the First.”  

Calvin’s concern was not merely categorical; there were practical implications with regard to worship.

Despite Luther’s dogged acceptance of the theological conviction that underlies the RPW, his practice was to allow human innovations into the worship service. In the section on liturgy and hymns in his “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg” (1523) he writes:

Now the additions of the early fathers who, it is reported, softly prayed one or two Psalms before blessing the bread and wine are commendable…Those who added the Kyrie eleison also did well…Later, when chanting began, the Psalms were changed into the introit; the Angelic Hymn Glória in Excelsis: et in terra pax, the graduals, the alleluias, the Nicene Creed, the Sanctus, the Agnus Dei, and the communion were added. All of these are unobjectionable, especially the ones that are sung de tempore or on Sundays….But when everyone felt free to add or change at will and when the tyranny of priestly greed and pride entered in, then our wicked kings, i.e., the bishops and pastors, began to erect those altars to the images of Baal and all the gods in the Lord’s temple.

Luther believed that these liturgical additions were “indifferent” as long as they were not out of accord with Scripture. However, “We should not consider as matters of indifference, and we should avoid as forbidden by God, ceremonies which are basically contrary to the Word of God.”

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63 Needham, 2000 Years of Christ’s Power, 148-149.
64 Ibid., 149.
the ancient cultus as possible and purify the rest, led him to translate the medieval Catholic liturgy into German without much adaptation: “We therefore first assert: It is not now nor ever has been our intention to abolish the liturgical service of God completely, but rather to purify the one that is now in use from the wretched accretions which corrupt it and to point out an evangelical use.”68 The primary concern he had “with papal rites and ceremonies was that they were compulsory and considered necessary for salvation.”69

Luther did not allow any and all additions of man-made tradition but only those which “may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church.”70 He referred to these “ceremonies or church usages which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God but have been introduced into the church in the interest of good order and the general welfare”71 as adiaphora (i.e., matters of indifference). How did Luther reconcile his theological convictions regarding the RPW with his practice of tolerance toward adiaphora? How could the great Reformer and doctor of theology argue that God prescribes all elements of worship while allowing man-made elements in the worship of God? The answer is simple – by defining adiaphora in such a way that it is not considered to be worship at all: “the ceremonies or church usages which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God, but which have been introduced solely for the sake of good order and the general welfare, are in and for themselves no divine worship or even a part of it.”72 Unsurprisingly, Luther’s line of demarcation was sola fide: “There had been a tendency … to assume that as long as the doctrine

69 Schwertley, Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship, 49.
71 “The Formula of Concord,” 492.
of justification was preached, all would be well. The externals mattered little. Indeed, to devote too much attention to them would seem to militate against the inwardness of true religion.”⁷³

Luther writes, “external rites … do not commend us to God … Faith and love commend us to God … So the kingdom of God is not any rite, but faith within you.”⁷⁴ Therefore, these ceremonies must not be viewed as necessary but as noncompulsory rites that can be added, deleted, or changed at the discretion of each community.⁷⁵

Calvin shared Luther’s convictions on the underlying theology of the RPW. Did he also share his view of adiaphora? For Zwingli (i.e., Calvin’s predecessor and the initiator of the “Reformed” branch of the Reformation), “there were, strictly speaking, no adiaphora. Practice as well as doctrine must be tested at every point by the Word of God … [it] must be the supreme court of appeal not merely in matters of faith and ethics but in all the co-related questions of ecclesiastical practice.”⁷⁶ Calvin, following Zwingli’s example, “gave at best minimal theological importance to [adiaphora].”⁷⁷ The only instance in which he uses the term in his Institutes is in the context of general Christian liberty, not worship.⁷⁸ This lack of attention by Calvin is not to say that he failed to make the important distinction between elements of worship (i.e.,biblically prescribed components, such as preaching and prayer) and circumstances of worship (i.e., forms of organization, such as time of the church service and temperature of the room).⁷⁹ He believed that circumstances are “necessary in all human society to foster the

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⁷⁷ Keith, “Too Narrow a Straightjacket?” 12.
⁷⁸ Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1:838 (3.19.7). See also 1:839 (3.19.8). Notice that Calvin includes the discussion in book three, rather than book four, where the worship of the church is discussed.
⁷⁹ Ibid., 2:1207 (4.10.30). See also Johnson, Reformed Worship, 29.
common peace and maintain concord.” For a general principle of how to order circumstances for the well-being of the church, he appeals to 1 Corinthians 14:40, which is Paul’s command that all things in the church must be done properly and in an orderly manner. Calvin writes,

We further see that in human transactions some procedure is always in effect, which is to be respected in the interests of public decency, and even of humanity itself. This ought especially to be observed in churches, which are best sustained when all things are under a well-ordered constitution, and which without concord become no churches at all. Therefore, if we wish to provide for the safety of the church, we must attend with all diligence to Paul’s command that “all things be done decently and in order” [I Cor. 14:40] … [These observances] are not to be considered necessary for salvation and thus bind consciences by scruples; nor are they to be associated with the worship of God, and piety thus be lodged in them.

Calvin summarizes by stating that the Lord has prescribed by explicit command in Scripture all aspects (i.e., elements) of worship but did not explicitly address in detail outward discipline and ceremonies (i.e., circumstances of worship per WCF 1.6). For these, we are to rely on general principles and fittingness to the time and culture.

**The Heart of the Impact**

Almost five hundred years of history have passed since Luther and Calvin set themselves and their followers on separate trajectories with regard to the understanding and application of the RPW. This variance has, over time, led to significant differences in worship practices in the modern church between those who uphold the RPW as Calvin did and those who do not. One example will serve to illustrate the point – singing in the worship of God – since Luther and Calvin both, in different ways, revolutionized congregational singing during the Reformation.

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81 Ibid., 2:1205-1206 (4.10.27).
82 Ibid., 2:1207-1208 (4.10.30).
In the medieval church, “singing was not performed by the congregation but by well-trained or professional choirs. The singing was usually in Latin and was so complex and elaborate that it could not be understood by the people.”\(^84\) Luther and Calvin agreed that major changes needed to take place with regard to the medieval practice. Gregorian chants, elaborate pipe organs, and unintelligible speech must be displaced, and congregational singing in the native tongue of the worshippers as an expression of thanksgiving must be set forth.\(^85\) Although they shared this basic agreement, their application of the RPW led them in different directions. Even though it may be said that “Luther did as much as anyone to revive and popularize psalm singing in the sixteenth century,”\(^86\) the concept of *adiaphora* allowed him to incorporate practices that “had great popular appeal.”\(^87\) By 1523, Luther had already begun composing hymns for congregational singing. His “first congregational hymn book, *Geystliche Gesangbuchlein*, was published in 1524,”\(^88\) and four collections of chorales (i.e., church songs) were published in the same year. Luther also incorporated the use of musical instruments in worship.

Although Luther was influential in many ways, “[the] other leading reformers strongly disagreed with Luther’s view of worship … God alone has the prerogative to order His worship, and man has no right to intrude his own inventions and devices into it.”\(^89\) Before Calvin, and during the time in which Luther began composing hymns and chorales, Ulrich Zwingli was clearing the church of all things not sanctioned by the New Testament:

\(^{84}\) John Price, *Old Light on New Worship: Musical Instruments and the Worship of God, a Theological, Historical and Psychological Study* (Avinger, TX: Simpson, 2007), 86.


\(^{86}\) Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship that is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1984), 48.

\(^{87}\) White, *Protestant Worship*, 43.

\(^{88}\) Barber, “Luther and Calvin on Music and Worship,” 1.

\(^{89}\) Price, *Old Light on New Worship*, 90.
Zwingli’s outlook produced in Switzerland a much more obvious, visible break with the traditional worship of the Middle Ages than occurred in Lutheran Germany. By April 1525, the Zurich Reformer had secured the removal from Zurich’s churches of all religious pictures, statues, crucifixes, candles, altars, and relics, and the abolition of the organ, the choir, priestly robes, religious processions, and the monasteries. None of these things, Zwingli argued, were authorised by the New Testament.90

Zwingli was “a great lover of music and had studied it for over ten years in the schools and universities of Bern, Vienna and Basil. He was an accomplished musician and composer.”91 Nevertheless, his desire to ban musical instruments from worship derived from adherence to the RPW. “Calvin’s approach to the reform of worship in Strasbourg and Geneva was similar to that of Zwingli in Zurich. Calvin believed that nothing should be done in Christian worship unless the New Testament authorised it.”92 For this reason, his goal was not to be innovative but to restore “the church to the simplicity and purity of apostolic worship.”93 With this motivation in mind, he “began working on metrical versions of psalms for use in public worship”94 very early in his ministry and printed the first Genevan Psalter in 1542.95 In addition to using metrical psalms, Calvin advocated singing a capella (i.e., without instrumental accompaniment): “He vehemently objected to the use of musical instruments in Christian worship, believing that they were part of the Temple ceremonies that had been abolished by Christ.”96

Following Calvin’s development of the Genevan Psalter, Presbyterian Churches sang psalms without instrumental accompaniment for “two and a half centuries.”97

Reformed and Presbyterian churches in America were exclusively psalm singing … as were the Congregationalists and Baptists … [until a few decades after the publication of] a book that purported to be another psalter, Isaac Watts’s The Psalms of David Imitated (1719). Ironically Watts’s hymns and psalm paraphrases were the primary vehicle through which hymns finally were accepted into the public worship of Protestants, yet not

90 Needham, 2000 Years of Christ’s Power, 149.
91 Price, Old Light on New Worship, 91.
92 Needham, 2000 Years of Christ’s Power, 228.
93 Price, Old Light on New Worship, 93.
94 Beeke, “Psalm Singing in Calvin and the Puritans,” 19.
95 Ibid.
96 Price, Old Light on New Worship, 93.
97 Michael Bushell, Songs of Zion: The Biblical Basis for Exclusive Psalmody ([n.p.], 2010), 261, 287.
without considerable controversy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Still, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that hymns began to overtake the Psalms in popular use.  

Although the trend began to change quickly for some, those who traditionally embraced the RPW took a little longer to budge: “American Presbyterians did not create their first hymnal until 1831, and they were among the first in the Reformed tradition to do so.” What brought them to this point? Although the psalm paraphrases of Isaac Watts opened the door for hymnody, misplaced evangelistic zeal furthered their use: “hymns were introduced under the influence of the evangelical ‘fervor’ attending the Great Awakening … Scriptural psalmody was not dispensed with as the result of theological reflection on the issues involved. Rather, people simply decided that the Psalms were not well-suited to their new-found evangelistic techniques.” The same reasons were employed regarding the use of instruments in worship:

In general, those churches in England and America that were guided by the Reformation continued firm in their opposition to all musical instruments in worship until the early to mid 1700s … By the end of the 18th century, the principles of the Reformation, which had guided such churches for centuries, had largely disappeared … Some of the arguments in support of the organ included its rising popularity among the churches, its appeal to the younger members of the church, and its supposed usefulness in evangelism.

Just as it took time for people to warm up to hymnody through a slow infusion over time until psalmody was completely overtaken by it, the types of musical instruments employed in the church were limited at first. By and large, the organ alone was used until the 20th century, when a transition began slowly, allowing the piano to come into prominence. By the middle of the 20th century, all restraint began to disappear as the church became infected by the culture at large:

100 Bushell, Songs of Zion, 289, 290.
101 Price, Old Light on New Worship, 126, 127-128.
102 Ibid., 138.
In the 1950s and 60s, the western world was shocked by the rapid popular success of rock-and-roll music among young people. Many instruments that had rarely, if ever, been used in worship before, such as the guitar, drums, saxophone, etc. began to find acceptance in many churches. With the development of technology, the electronic keyboard and synthesizer, along with amplification were added. By the end of the 20th century, the entire ethos of the world had found its way into the church through music. In many worship services today, little difference can be found between a rock-and-roll concert and the music of the church … With the loss of biblical principles, we now see what confusion has entered into the worship of the modern church. The convictions of the Reformers and Puritans have been entirely lost, and the use of any kind of musical instruments is accepted in almost every branch of Christianity. The choice of what musical instrument to use is now purely a matter of personal preference.\(^{103}\)

Now, less than one hundred years later, many churches have moved beyond Luther’s views of *adiaphora* and have adopted an “anything goes” mentality. Unfortunately, worship is viewed by countless Reformed and Evangelical Christian leaders as a form of entertainment designed to attract and amuse believers and unbelievers alike:

The kinds of innovation being tried are extraordinary, even radical. For example, some churches now offer their largest services on Friday or Saturday night instead of Sunday morning. These services are usually heavy on music and entertainment, offering people an alternative to the theater or social circuit … Even the music and skits are carefully chosen to make unbelievers feel comfortable. Almost nothing is dismissed as inappropriate: rock ‘n’ roll oldies, disco tunes, heavy metal, rap, dancing, comedy, clowns, mime artists, stage magic, martial arts, cage fighting, and (more recently) explicit sex education have all become part of the evangelical repertoire.\(^{104}\)

Apart from the RPW for which Calvin so earnestly contended, confusion abounds in the 21st century about worship, even by people who claim to accept the regulative principle. John MacArthur, a conservative Evangelical pastor, has made the mistake of affirming the truthfulness of the RPW while concerning himself only with the largest and most detestable abuses of worship in the church. He writes:

> But the principle of *sola Scriptura* as it applies to worship [i.e., the RPW] is nevertheless worth defending fiercely. The principle itself is by no means trivial. After all, failure to adhere to the biblical prescription for worship is the very thing that plunged the church into the darkness and idolatry of the Middle Ages.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 138-139.
I have no interest in igniting a debate about musical instruments vs. a capella singing, hymns vs. exclusive psalmody, choirs and soloists vs. congregational singing, or other questions regarding music style. If there are those who want to use the regulative principle as a springboard for endless debates about such questions (or even more incidental matters), please leave me out. The issues that spark my concern about contemporary worship are far larger than that. They go to the very heart of what it means to worship in spirit and truth.

My concern is this: the contemporary church’s abandonment of *sola Scriptura* as the regulative principle has opened the church to some of the grossest imaginable abuses – including honkytonk church services, wrestling exhibitions, and (in some cases) virtually a carnival sideshow atmosphere. Even the broadest, most liberal application of the regulative principle would have a corrective effect on such abuses.

Consider for a moment what would happen to corporate worship if the contemporary church took *sola Scriptura* seriously.\(^{105}\)

Although it is commendable that he contends for the RPW as *sola Scriptura* applied to worship, there are several fundamental problems with MacArthur’s overall argument. He rightly captures the seriousness of God’s regulations, arguing that the RPW should be fiercely defended and that failure to adhere to it has plunged the church into darkness. However, he then contradicts his own statements by relegating issues surrounding congregational singing to a non-priority status with which no one should be concerned. He then elevates gross errors as the only areas of legitimate concern. In all of this, he misses the fact that major aberrations do not begin as such but with small steps away from the prescription of the Lord. Thus, railing against “major” perversions of worship only amounts to focusing on the symptom instead of the true problem.

Even conservative Presbyterian and Reformed writers who claim to be in the tradition of Calvin and vehemently uphold the RPW, such as Hughes Oliphant Old, have veered off of the path with regard to singing in the church. Old argues that the “work of Isaac Watts exemplifies the Reformed doxological tradition at its best [because we] find in his work a balance between psalmody and hymnody … one would not want to return to a legalistic insistence on exclusive psalmody.”\(^{106}\) As a result of statements like this, serious-minded advocates of the RPW who


\(^{106}\) Old, *Worship that is Reformed According to Scripture*, 55.
desire to honor God in worship, such as many Reformers and Puritans of old, as well as Reformed Presbyterians today, are dubbed as legalists who are stuck in the past. In reality, instead of *semper reformanda* (i.e., always reforming), the church at large has regressed:

Christian history indicates a connection between the use of musical instruments and the spiritual decline of the church … The movement of many modern churches to what is called ‘contemporary worship,’ which is often dominated by instrumental music, is not really a step of reformation and enlightenment as it is often portrayed. It is rather another departure from the biblical principles of the Protestant Reformation and a bold step backward toward the sensuality that dominated Medieval Roman Catholic worship. As we look back over the entire history of the church, there are only two periods in which musical instruments have had great prominence in worship. The first was the dark ages of Roman Catholicism in the 14th and 15th centuries, and the second is our own generation … because of the wide variety of musical instruments available today and the electronic amplification that is so common, the scene we are witnessing in the modern church is unparalleled in history … In this sense, our modern situation is worse than before the Protestant Reformation. We have witnessed, in our own generation, the continuing advance of a man-centered theology and worship in the modern evangelical church. What God desires in His worship is hardly a consideration.  

The contemporary church at large would do well to reject the path paved by Luther, study the Scriptures afresh, and read the works of Calvin and others who clearly espouse the RPW. Doing so would no doubt help to reverse the disturbing trend of cultural influence in worship and to turn Reformed and Evangelical churches back to the Word of God to relearn how to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). Price could not be more correct in stating that the “modern church is in desperate need for another reformation of its worship.” Sadly, after traveling along Luther’s trajectory away from the regulative principle for almost five hundred years, the church at large has moved so far from Biblical worship that she now views the idea of singing psalms without music accompaniment as strange or odd. This needs to change! Michael LeFebvre writes, “The fact that the Psalms seem awkward to us in today’s church, and hard to understand … is an illustration of how desperately the church today needs to relearn the Psalms in order to

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107 Price, *Old Light on New Worship*, 142-143.
108 John 4:24, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”
use them again. It shows us how much we really do need to reform our worship in order to sing praise the way the church has sung throughout the centuries.”

CONCLUSION

Martin Luther and John Calvin differed on more than the nature of the Lord’s Supper. Although Luther touted theological agreement with the RPW, his arbitrary definition of adiaphora, combined with his willingness to incorporate human innovations into the worship of God without considering them to be worship, prevented him from a uniform application of the RPW. Thus, Luther inconsistently promoted a regulative principle of worship while exercising a normative practice of worship. Perhaps Luther’s doctrine of adiaphora has, over time, confirmed Calvin’s caution and concern that men, who are naturally idolaters, often desire to please themselves more than God in worship.

Although Calvin did not originate the RPW, his systematic exposition of it made the most impact during the Reformation and beyond. Calvin’s deep conviction was that the heart of the Christian faith is the legitimate worship of God, and he saw the awful consequences of failing to believe and heed the RPW, such as natural-born idolaters not knowing how to please God apart from His revelation, a denial of the sufficiency of Scripture, and a damaging of the doctrines of the church and God’s sovereignty. Calvin provides a fitting summary:

I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we

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100 Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 150.
111 Godfrey, “Calvin and the Worship of God,” 34.
112 Keith, “Too Narrow a Straightjacket?,” 3.
gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, “Obedience is better than sacrifice.” “In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men,” (1 Sam. xv. 22; Matth. xv. 9.) Every addition to His word, especially in this matter, is a lie. Mere “will worship” (εξοθησοκεία) is vanity. This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.  

It is arguable that, regardless of their views on the Lord’s Supper, Luther and Calvin’s difference with regard to the RPW would have inevitably led to the Magisterial divide. Keith states, “A correct view and practice of worship was one of the few criteria which justified to Calvin the establishment of a separate Reformed church, and cleared the guilt of schism.”  

Five hundred years of history has shown that those who have implemented Luther’s practice of allowing human innovations and non-inspired compositions into the worship of God have wreaked havoc and significantly weakened the modern church. In the name of honoring God, He has been dishonored. Now is the time for the church to return to the RPW and reclaim the purity of worship that Calvin espoused and practiced.

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115 Keith, “Too Narrow a Straightjacket?,” 3.
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divide, dominant, haul. (Definition of magisterial from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus © Cambridge University Press). Examples of magisterial. magisterial. Its sensitiveness to moral ideas, its intolerance of the high hand, its dislike of the magisterial brow are his. From Cambridge English Corpus. These offices, while peculiarly civic, were also a palimpsest of magisterial authority. From Cambridge English Corpus. This is a magisterial study of the background to the subject. From Cambridge English Corpus. This is a magisterial work and an object lesson in the use of these kinds of source material. From Cambridge English Corpus. Another was the reformation, both magisterial and radical. From Cambridge English Corpus. Download scientific diagram | Magisterial districts in South Africa from publication: Mapping crime levels and court efficiency per magisterial district in South Africa | South Africa is subdivided into provinces and each province is further subdivided into magisterial districts, the area of jurisdiction of a district court. South African Courts have a three-tier structure namely: district, regional and high court. The Department of Justice | Crime, Courts and Crime Mapping | ResearchGate, the professional network for scientists. The Commonwealth of Virginia is divided into 95 counties and 38 independent cities, which are considered county-equivalents for census purposes. All counties, with the exception of Arlington County, are further subdivided into magisterial districts. Magisterial districts are defined by the United States Census Bureau as a minor civil division that is a nonfunctioning subdivision used in conducting elections or recording land ownership, and are not governments. These districts are unique to counties.