

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 9: WORSHIP

The Gathered Assembly Before the Living God

Lesson 26

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE OF WORSHIP

What God Commands, Not What Man Invents

The question of worship is not what will please the congregation but what will please God — and God has not left that question to human creativity. He has spoken. The church that listens will worship faithfully; the church that invents will worship at best sincerely and at worst idolatrously.

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:24, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Leviticus 10:1–2; Deuteronomy 12:32; John 4:23–24; Colossians 3:16–17; 1 Corinthians 14:26–40; Acts 2:42

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

The covenant community gathered before the living God. This is the foundational vision of what the church is when it assembles on the Lord's Day, not a meeting of religiously interested individuals pursuing their own spiritual preferences, not a performance staged for the benefit of an audience of seekers, and not a celebration organized around the aesthetic and experiential expectations of a target demographic. It is the covenant community of the redeemed, gathered in the presence of the God who purchased it with His Son's blood, to offer back to Him the worship that He has prescribed, in the forms that He has authorized, for the purposes He has ordained. Everything about genuine corporate worship flows from this theocentric starting point: God is the audience; God is the authority; God defines the terms on which He is to be worshipped.

Unit 9 addresses the theology and practice of corporate worship across three lessons. This lesson examines the regulative principle of worship, the conviction that the corporate worship of the church should include only those elements that God has positively commanded in Scripture, ordered by the criteria that Scripture establishes and the Spirit enables. Lesson 27 will address the centrality of preaching in worship, the Reformation's recovery of the sermon as the main event of the gathered assembly and the scriptural basis for that recovery. Lesson 28 will address the role of the other elements of corporate worship, prayer, singing, Scripture reading, and the ordinances, as genuine acts of worship that together constitute the full assembly before the living God. Together the three lessons constitute a theological account of corporate worship that is both historically informed and pastorally practical.

The regulative principle is among the most contested and most practically significant convictions in the Reformed Baptist tradition's account of the church's life. The contemporary evangelical church's dominant approach to worship is effectively the opposite of the regulative principle: corporate worship is designed around what will attract, engage, and retain the target congregation, with the elements determined by the creativity of the worship leadership and the cultural expectations of the community. The regulative principle confronts this approach at its most fundamental premise: the question of corporate worship is not what will please the congregation but what will please God, and God has not left the answer to human creativity. He has spoken in His Word, He has prescribed the elements and the spirit in which He is to be worshipped, and the church that listens will worship faithfully. The church that invents will worship at best sincerely and at worst idolatrously, regardless of how aesthetically impressive, emotionally engaging, or culturally relevant the invented worship may be.

The lesson does not approach the regulative principle as a narrow, polemical instrument for criticizing everything the contemporary evangelical church does in worship. It approaches it as the positive, liberating, God-honoring conviction that it is: the conviction that the God who spoke is the God who speaks, that His Word is sufficient to define the forms in which the covenant community approaches Him, and that the worship shaped by that Word is richer, more profound, more God-glorifying, and ultimately more satisfying to the worshipping community than any worship shaped by human invention. The regulative principle is not anti-creativity; it is pro-fidelity, within the prescribed elements, there is enormous room for variety, beauty, contextual expression, and the full range of human creativity in service of the forms that God has appointed. But the forms themselves are God's to prescribe, not the congregation's to invent.

I. THE NATURE OF CORPORATE WORSHIP

The Covenant Community Before the Holy God

A. What Corporate Worship Is

Corporate worship is the covenant community's gathered, deliberate, Spirit-enabled, Scripture-ordered offering of itself to the living God in the forms He has prescribed. Every element of this definition carries theological weight. The gathered character of corporate worship distinguishes it from private devotion: the community assembles together, as the body of Christ, before the God who is its Head. The deliberate character distinguishes it from the incidental experience of God's presence in the ordinary events of life: the community is specifically and intentionally directing its attention and its offering toward God. The Spirit-enabled character distinguishes it from human performance: the worship that reaches God is not the product of human skill or creativity but of the Spirit's gracious enabling of the community's praise and prayer and receptivity to the Word. The Scripture-ordered character distinguishes it from human invention: the community approaches God in the forms He has prescribed in His Word, not in forms it has devised from its own religious imagination.

The theological center of corporate worship is the encounter between the covenant community and the covenant God, the living, holy, omniscient, omnipotent, self-existent Lord of heaven and earth who has graciously established a covenant with the community of the redeemed through the blood of His Son. This encounter is not symmetrical: the community approaches God as the redeemed creature approaches the sovereign Creator, the forgiven sinner approaches the holy Judge, and the adopted child approaches the heavenly Father. Each of these relational dimensions of the community's approach to God shapes the spirit in which genuine corporate worship is offered: the reverence appropriate to the creature in the presence of the Creator, the gratitude appropriate to the forgiven sinner in the presence of the holy Judge, and the confidence appropriate to the adopted child in the presence of the heavenly Father. The corporate worship that loses any one of these dimensions, that is all confidence without reverence, or all reverence without confidence, or all gratitude without genuinely knowing what has been forgiven and what the forgiveness cost, has impoverished the fullness of the community's encounter with the God who has established all three dimensions of the relationship.

John 4:23-24 provides the most direct dominical account of what genuine worship requires: 'But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.' The two requirements, spirit and truth, are the two dimensions that define genuine worship in Christ's own account. Worship in spirit is worship that is genuinely engaged, genuinely offered from the heart, genuinely addressed to the living God rather than performed for the benefit of the human audience in the room. Worship in truth is worship that is genuinely informed by the truth of who God is and what He has done, worship that corresponds to the reality of the God being worshipped rather than to a culturally conditioned or personally preferred image of Him. Both dimensions are required: the worship that is all spirit without truth is an earnest but potentially misdirected emotionalism; the worship that is all truth without spirit is an orthodox but potentially lifeless formalism.

B. The Holiness of God and the Seriousness of Approach

The seriousness with which the covenant community approaches the living God in corporate worship is grounded in the nature of the God being approached. The God of the Bible is not the pleasantly affirming deity of therapeutic culture who accepts whatever form of approach human beings find most natural and most personally fulfilling. He is the holy God of Isaiah 6, before whose throne the seraphim cover their faces and their feet and cry 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory,' and before whose holiness the prophet Isaiah falls down in devastation: 'Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' This is the God to whom the covenant community approaches in corporate worship, and the holiness of the One being approached demands the kind of serious, Scripture-ordered, Spirit-enabled reverence that genuine approach to genuine holiness requires.

The second commandment's prohibition of images in worship, '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. You shall not worship them or serve them' (Exodus 20:4-5), establishes the most fundamental principle of the regulative principle of worship: the God who cannot be adequately represented by any created image also cannot be adequately worshipped by any humanly invented form. Both the image and the invented worship form are human attempts to confine the infinite God within the limits of finite human imagination, and both are forbidden by the same divine jealousy. The prohibition of images in the second commandment is not merely a prohibition of physical idols; it is the prohibition of any form of worship that replaces the God-prescribed with the human-invented. The regulative principle is the second commandment applied to corporate worship practice.

The seriousness of approach that the Holy God demands is not incompatible with the joy that genuine worship produces. The same Isaiah who was devastated by the vision of God's holiness was also the prophet who described the eschatological worship of the redeemed community as a feast of gladness and a song of joy (Isaiah 25:6-9). The Psalms that reflect most deeply on the holiness and the majesty of God are also the Psalms that overflow with the most exuberant praise. The covenant community that has genuinely grasped both the holiness of the God it approaches and the grace that makes the approach possible, that knows the full weight of what the prophet said ('Woe is me, for I am ruined') and the full weight of what the seraph's coal accomplished ('your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven,' Isaiah 6:7), is the community whose worship is simultaneously most reverent and most joyful, because it understands most fully both the stakes and the grace of the encounter it is entering.

II. THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE STATED

Only What God Has Commanded

A. *The Principle Defined and Grounded*

The regulative principle of worship may be stated simply and precisely: the corporate worship of the church should include only those elements which God has positively commanded in Scripture. What is not commanded is not permitted in the corporate worship of the church; what is commanded is required; what is merely not forbidden is not sufficient authorization for inclusion. This is the principle as the Reformed and Puritan traditions have consistently formulated it, and it is the principle that this series endorses as the most faithful reading of the biblical account of how the holy God is to be approached in the corporate worship of His covenant community.

The regulative principle is grounded in the second commandment (Exodus 20:4-6), the Deuteronomic principle of Deuteronomy 12:32 ('Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it nor take away from it'), and the negative example of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-2: 'Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.' Nadab and Abihu did not worship a false god; they worshipped the true God with unauthorized worship. The specific indictment is that they offered fire which the LORD had not commanded them, not that they had been commanded to offer it differently, but that they had not been commanded to offer it at all. The unauthorized worship of the true God provoked the same divine judgment as the worship of false gods. The lesson is unambiguous: God determines how He is to be worshipped, not the worshippers.

The Westminster Confession of Faith's formulation of the regulative principle (Chapter 21.1) is the most precise and most influential in the Reformed tradition: 'The acceptable way of worshiping 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.' The 1689 Confession follows the Westminster formulation closely, establishing the same principle in the same language. The principle is not unique to the Puritan tradition; it is the consistent conviction of the Reformed and Calvinist tradition from Calvin's Geneva through the English Puritan movement to the Baptist confessional tradition, grounded in the same reading of the same biblical texts.

B. The Regulative Principle and the Normative Principle

The regulative principle must be distinguished from the alternative that the Lutheran and Anglican traditions have historically preferred: the normative principle of worship. The normative principle holds that the corporate worship of the church may include anything that Scripture does not explicitly forbid. On the normative principle, the default for worship practice is permission: anything is permitted unless Scripture specifically prohibits it. On the regulative principle, the default is prohibition: nothing is permitted unless Scripture specifically commands it. The difference is as significant as the difference between two systems of civil law: one in which everything is permitted unless specifically prohibited, and one in which nothing is permitted unless specifically authorized. The practical consequences of the two approaches are dramatically different.

Luther's practice of retaining in worship everything that was not explicitly condemned by Scripture, crucifixes, vestments, candles, incense, Latin chants, was a deliberate application of the normative principle in the context of the Reformation's pastoral conservatism about the pace and scope of liturgical reform. Calvin's practice of stripping the worship of Geneva down to the elements explicitly prescribed in the New Testament, the Word read and preached, the singing of Psalms, prayer, the administration of the sacraments, was a deliberate application of the regulative principle in the context of the Reformation's theological conviction about the second commandment. The debate between these two principles has shaped the worship practices of Protestant traditions ever since, and it continues to shape them today. The contemporary evangelical church's effective adoption of the normative principle, in the form of the consumer-driven worship that includes whatever attracts and engages the target congregation, is not a neutral middle position between Luther and Calvin; it is the extension of the normative principle's logic to its natural conclusion in a therapeutic, consumerist culture.

The regulative principle does not apply to every dimension of the church's corporate life. It applies specifically to the elements of corporate worship, the substantive acts of the gathered assembly before God. It does not apply to the circumstances of worship, the time, place, physical arrangements, and logistical details that attend the worship act. The 1689 Confession distinguishes between elements (the substantive content of worship, governed by the regulative principle) and circumstances (the contextual details of worship, governed by the light of nature and Christian prudence). The congregation that meets on Sunday morning rather than Sunday evening, that holds the service in an air-conditioned building rather than an open field, that uses a printed order of service rather than spontaneous structuring, and that provides chairs rather than pews, is making decisions about circumstances, not elements, and those decisions are appropriately governed by pastoral wisdom rather than by the regulative principle's specific authority.

III. THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

The Texts That Establish the Pattern

A. *The Old Testament Foundation*

The regulative principle is not a Reformation-era theological innovation; it is the consistent pattern of the biblical account of worship from the earliest chapters of Genesis to the last pages of Revelation. Cain's rejected offering in Genesis 4 is the first biblical illustration of the principle that God determines the acceptable form of worship: the Lord 'had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard' (Genesis 4:4-5). The text does not specify what specifically made Cain's offering unacceptable to God, but the consistent pattern of the biblical account suggests that the issue was not the sincerity of the offering but its conformity or non-conformity to what God had prescribed. The principle established at the earliest point in the biblical narrative is the same principle that Leviticus 10 later establishes explicitly: God accepts the worship He has authorized, not necessarily the worship that the worshippers believe to be acceptable.

The Tabernacle and Temple construction narratives establish the regulative principle at the level of institutional design: every detail of the Tabernacle's construction is specified in exhaustive divine prescription ('make it according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain,' Exodus 25:40; cf. Hebrews 8:5), and the specific prohibitions of human innovation in the Tabernacle's design and the Temple's worship are repeated throughout the Mosaic legislation. The principle that the sanctuary is God's space and that the access to and the worship of God within it must conform to the patterns God has prescribed is the foundation on which the entire Mosaic worship system rests. The New Testament's application of this principle to the Christian assembly does not relax the principle; it fulfills it in the context of the new covenant community's gathered worship before the living God.

Deuteronomy 12:32's formulation is the most comprehensive Old Testament expression of the regulative principle: 'Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.' The command is given in the context of worship specifically, the chapter addresses the destruction of Canaanite worship sites and the establishment of the specific place and form of Israel's worship in the Promised Land. The specific application is to worship practice, but the principle is formulated in terms broad enough to govern the full range of the covenant community's obedience to God's commands. The 'you shall not add to it nor take away

from it' establishes the Scripture's sufficiency and authority as the norm for the covenant community's practice with a comprehensiveness that the regulative principle of worship applies directly to the forms and elements of corporate worship.

B. The New Testament Patterns

The New Testament's account of the apostolic community's corporate worship establishes the elements of worship by positive description and apostolic authorization. Acts 2:42 provides the most concise summary of the apostolic community's worship: 'They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' Four elements: the Word (apostles' teaching), fellowship (koinonia), the ordinance (breaking of bread), and prayer. This is not an exhaustive list of everything the apostolic community ever did in its worship, but it is the apostolic author's specific enumeration of the characteristic practices of the community's gathered life. The New Testament adds to this list the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19), the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13), and the collection of tithes and offerings (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Together these elements constitute the New Testament's positive description of the apostolic community's corporate worship.

First Corinthians 14:26-40 provides the most extended apostolic instruction on the ordering of corporate worship, and its governing principle is precisely the regulative principle's concern: 'But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner' (verse 40). Paul's concern throughout the chapter is that the gathered community's worship should serve the edification of the whole body (verse 26: 'let all things be done for edification') and should conform to the nature of the God who authorizes it ('for God is not a God of confusion but of peace', verse 33). The specific instructions about tongues and prophecy in this chapter address specific abuse of specific gifts in the specific context of the Corinthian community, but the governing principle, that corporate worship must be ordered by God's own character and by the apostolic deposit that describes His character, is the principle that the regulative tradition has consistently applied to the full range of worship practice.

John 4:23-24's 'worship in spirit and truth' provides the most comprehensive New Testament account of what genuine worship requires, and the 'truth' dimension is the New Testament's most direct endorsement of the regulative principle's concern. Worship in truth is worship that conforms to the truth about God, truth that is revealed in the Scripture, proclaimed in the preached Word, enacted in the ordinances, declared in the prayers and singing, and heard in the reading of the apostolic deposit. The worship that invents its own forms, that determines its own content by the worshippers' preferences and cultural expectations, that substitutes the emotionally engaging for the theologically true, is not worship in truth, however sincere and however fervent it may be. The regulative principle is the application of John 4:24's 'truth' requirement to the specific question of which elements may and should constitute the covenant community's corporate worship.

IV. THE ELEMENTS OF WORSHIP

What Scripture Prescribes for the Gathered Assembly

A. The Prescribed Elements of Corporate Worship

The elements of corporate worship prescribed in the New Testament are those that the apostolic deposit positively describes and authorizes for the gathered community's common act before God. The list is not long, but its theological richness is inexhaustible: the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13), the preaching of the Word (2 Timothy 4:2; Acts 20:7), prayer (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 2:1-2), the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19), the administration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26), and the collection of tithes and offerings (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Each of these elements is both a form in which the community gives something to God and a form in which God gives something to the community.

The reading of Scripture is the community's most direct encounter with the living Word of God in the worship service, and its designation as a prescribed element establishes the priority of the Word in every dimension of the gathered assembly's life. Paul's instruction to Timothy to 'give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching' (1 Timothy 4:13) places the public reading of the biblical text alongside the preaching and teaching that flows from it as a distinct and irreplaceable element of the community's corporate worship. The community that never reads the biblical text publicly, that has reduced the role of Scripture in the gathered assembly to brief proof-text quotations in support of the preacher's thematic messages, has diminished one of the most direct forms of the congregation's encounter with the living God in its gathered worship. The preaching of the Word, addressed as the sermon's subject in Lesson 27, is the community's primary hearing of God's speech in the gathering, and its centrality in the gathered assembly is the most direct expression of the regulative principle's insistence that God speaks to His people in their corporate worship.

Prayer in the corporate worship is the community's most direct speech to God in the gathering, and the New Testament's instructions about prayer in the assembly (1 Timothy 2:1-2 on the types of prayer; 1 Corinthians 14:15-16 on prayer that is intelligible to the congregation) establish prayer as a prescribed element of corporate worship whose form and content must be governed by the same apostolic criteria that govern the other elements. The singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16) is the community's most directly affective form of worship, the form in which the truths of the Word are set to music and the community expresses its response to God's character and acts in the form most naturally suited to the fullness of human response, engaging both the mind and the emotions in the declaration of who God is and what He has done. The administration of the ordinances, addressed in Units 6 and 7, is the community's most enacted form of worship, the visible word of the gospel proclaimed in the physical forms of water, bread, and cup. The collection of tithes and offerings is the community's most concrete material form of worship, the enacted declaration that the community's material resources belong to the God who provides them and that the community's mission is worthy of the material investment it requires.

B. The Circumstances of Worship: Where the Principle Gives Way to Prudence

The regulative principle governs the elements of corporate worship, the substantive acts of the gathered community before God. It does not govern the circumstances of worship, the logistical and contextual details that attend those elements without themselves being the substantive content of worship. The Westminster Confession's distinction between elements and circumstances (Chapter 1.6) is theologically precise and practically important: 'There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.' The light of nature and Christian

prudence, not the specific prescription of Scripture, govern the time of gathering, the length of the service, the physical arrangement of the meeting space, the use of printed materials, the amplification of the spoken Word, the accompaniment of singing, and the many other logistical details that the gathered community must determine in order to carry out the prescribed elements in its specific cultural and historical context.

The practical application of the elements-circumstances distinction is one of the most important skills in the theology of corporate worship, and it is also one of the most contested. The question of whether musical instruments in worship are an element (governed by the regulative principle and therefore requiring specific scriptural authorization) or a circumstance (governed by prudence and therefore appropriate if not specifically forbidden) has divided the Reformed tradition since the Reformation. The Scottish Covenanters who rejected instrumental music as an unwarranted addition to the elements of worship were applying the regulative principle with a strictness that even Calvin did not consistently practice. The contemporary evangelical church's inclusion of full amplified bands with drums, bass guitars, and lighting rigs in corporate worship is making a different application of the same distinction. This series locates musical accompaniment in the category of circumstances rather than elements: the prescribed element is the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; the accompaniment of that singing is a circumstance governed by prudence, cultural context, and the governing principle of edification.

The distinction also applies to the specific form that preaching takes, the arrangement of seating, the use of visual aids in the teaching of the Word, the length and structure of prayers, and the specific form of the Lord's Supper's administration. All of these are circumstances that prudence and culture appropriately shape; none of them is an element whose form is specifically governed by the regulative principle. The regulative principle's authority is real and comprehensive over the elements it governs; its domain is specifically the elements, and the congregation that extends its authority to the circumstances, treating every logistical decision as a matter of principle requiring specific scriptural warrant, has applied the principle with a rigorosity that the principle itself does not require and that tends to produce the kind of sterile uniformity that mistakes uniformity for faithfulness.

V. THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE IN PRACTICE

Applying the Principle to the Contemporary Congregation

A. *What the Principle Affirms*

The regulative principle, faithfully applied, affirms a rich and theologically satisfying vision of corporate worship that is neither the bare, joyless minimalism that critics sometimes associate with it nor the anything-goes maximalism that the normative principle permits. It affirms the centrality of the Word in every dimension of the gathered assembly's life, the Word read, preached, prayed, sung, and enacted in the ordinances. It affirms the full range of the New Testament's prescribed worship elements as the comprehensive resources that the covenant community needs for its gathered encounter with the living God: the public reading of Scripture that addresses the ear with the text of God's own speech, the sermon that expounds the meaning and application of that text, the prayers that offer back to God the community's response to His Word and His acts, the singing that engages the whole person in the declaration of who God is and what He has done, the ordinances that enact in physical form the gospel's central truths, and the offering that returns to God a portion of what His provision has given.

The regulative principle also affirms the full range of human creativity in the service of the prescribed elements. The sermon may be any form of expository communication that faithfully expounds the biblical text and applies it to the congregation's life, narrative, theological, topical (when the topic is biblical), biographical, or any other form that serves the text's meaning and the congregation's formation. The prayers may be composed beforehand or offered extemporaneously, as long as they are genuinely addressed to God, genuinely informed by the truth of who God is and what He has done, and genuinely expressive of the community's real needs, thanksgivings, confessions, and petitions. The singing may employ any melodic and harmonic form that serves the community's expression of the texts being sung. The reading of Scripture may be dramatic, interpretive, choral, or any other form that serves the Word's faithful communication to the gathered assembly. The principle does not restrict the form of the elements; it specifies that the elements themselves must be those that God has prescribed.

The most important practical affirmation of the regulative principle is the affirmation that God has given His covenant community everything it needs for rich, satisfying, theologically deep, and genuinely God-glorifying corporate worship in the simple, Spirit-dependent, Word-centered elements that the New Testament prescribes. The congregation that has truly learned to read the Scriptures with the depth and the attentiveness that the public reading of Scripture deserves, to hear the Word preached with the faith-expectant receptivity that the Spirit-anointed proclamation of the gospel warrants, to pray with the genuine God-directedness and the theological substance that prayer's character as covenant speech to the living God requires, to sing with the full engagement of mind and heart that the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of the apostolic community model, and to receive the ordinances with the theological seriousness and the covenant awareness that Units 6 and 7 have described, has more than enough for genuine corporate worship. It needs nothing more.

B. What the Principle Resists

The regulative principle resists, with equal firmness, the two failure modes that historically afflict corporate worship: the innovations that add to the prescribed elements and the subtractions that remove them. The innovations of the Roman Catholic tradition, the Mass as a sacrifice, the veneration of saints, the use of images, the prayer to Mary, the requirement of auricular confession, are the most historically significant additions to the worship that the apostolic deposit prescribes, and they are the innovations that the Reformation's application of the regulative principle most directly addressed. But the contemporary evangelical church's innovations are equally problematic, if less theologically dramatic: the replacement of biblical preaching with motivational talks, the replacement of the sung psalms with commercially produced pop songs whose theological content is minimal, the replacement of corporate prayer with individual meditation accompanied by ambient music, and the reduction of the Lord's Supper to an infrequent institutional ceremony rather than the regular covenant renewal that the apostolic pattern established. Each of these innovations either adds to the apostolic pattern or removes from it, and each is addressed by the same principle: God determines how He is to be worshipped.

The regulative principle also resists the specific temptation that is most pressing for the contemporary evangelical congregation: the temptation to design corporate worship around what will attract, engage, and retain the target congregation. The so-called seeker-sensitive worship model, in which the gathered assembly is designed primarily for the benefit of the non-Christian visitor whose comfort and aesthetic preferences determine the form of the service, is not merely a misapplication of the regulative principle. It is a category error about who corporate worship is for. Corporate worship is the covenant community's gathered offering to the living God; it is not a performance staged for the benefit of the unconverted visitor. The converted community that worships God in

the spirit and truth of John 4:23-24 will be attractive to the genuinely seeking visitor precisely because it is genuinely encountering the living God rather than performing for the visitor's benefit. The worship that is designed to be attractive will often fail to be genuine; the worship that is designed to be genuine will often prove to be genuinely attractive.

The practical test of the regulative principle in any specific congregation's worship is a simple one: does each element of the corporate worship have a positive scriptural warrant? Not merely the absence of a specific prohibition, but a positive command or apostolic authorization? The sermon, yes: 'preach the word' (2 Timothy 4:2). The singing, yes: 'singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' (Colossians 3:16). Prayer, yes: 'I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men' (1 Timothy 2:1). The reading of Scripture, yes: 'give attention to the public reading of Scripture' (1 Timothy 4:13). The Lord's Supper, yes: 'do this in remembrance of Me' (1 Corinthians 11:24). The offering, yes: 'On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save' (1 Corinthians 16:2). For each element that survives this test, the congregation worships with the confidence that it is doing what God has authorized. For each element that does not, the congregation must ask whether the element is a circumstance (which prudence may include) or an element (which requires specific authorization).

VI. THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE AND WORSHIP RENEWAL

The Recovery of God-Centered Corporate Worship

A. *The Contemporary Worship Crisis*

The contemporary evangelical church's worship is in a state of genuine crisis, though the crisis is not widely perceived as a crisis because the forms of contemporary worship are often extremely successful by the metrics most commonly used to evaluate them: attendance, emotional engagement, aesthetic quality, and cultural relevance. The worship bands are polished; the lighting is impressive; the production values are high; the emotional responses of the congregation are visible and vigorous. By the standards of a performance, the contemporary evangelical worship service is often excellent. By the standards of the regulative principle, by the question of whether what is happening in the gathered assembly corresponds to what God has prescribed for the encounter between His covenant community and Himself, the assessment is considerably more sobering.

The specific forms of the contemporary worship crisis are familiar to anyone who has observed the evangelical landscape with theological seriousness. The sermon has been reduced in many congregations from the expository proclamation of the biblical text to a theme-driven talk organized around the preacher's communicative goals rather than the text's own meaning and structure. The singing has migrated from the theologically substantive psalms, hymns, and confessional songs of the church's historical hymnody to a diet of commercially produced praise choruses whose lyrical content is often thin and whose emotional character can substitute the feeling of worship for the engagement of the mind with the truth that genuine worship in truth requires. The prayers have become in many congregations brief and formulaic, transitions between elements of the service rather than genuine corporate speech to the living God. The Lord's Supper has been marginalized to the status of a quarterly

ceremony that interrupts the regular flow of the service rather than the regular covenant renewal that the apostolic pattern established.

Each of these failures is, at its core, a failure of the regulative principle: a substitution of what is humanly attractive or emotionally engaging for what God has prescribed as the means of genuine corporate encounter with Himself. The remedy is not primarily institutional, not a new set of worship policies or a new music selection process, but theological: the recovery of the conviction that God has spoken about how He is to be worshipped, that His prescribed elements are sufficient for the full range of the community's corporate encounter with Him, and that the worship which takes His Word seriously in the determination of its form is the worship that most fully honors the God who speaks.

B. The Positive Vision of Worship Renewal

The recovery of the regulative principle in a congregation's corporate worship is not a recovery of liturgical austerity for its own sake. It is the recovery of the positive, God-centered, Word-saturated worship that the prescribed elements, faithfully and fully employed, make possible. The congregation that takes the public reading of Scripture seriously, that gives generous time to the reading of substantial portions of the biblical text, that hears the text as the very speech of God addressed to the gathered community, will find the Word speaking with a power and an immediacy that the reduced role of Scripture in much contemporary evangelical worship has obscured. The congregation that takes preaching seriously, that hears the text expounded with theological depth and pastoral application by a pastor who has spent his week in the study under the authority of the text, will find its faith strengthened and its understanding deepened in ways that the motivational talk cannot achieve.

The congregation that takes corporate prayer seriously, that gives substantial time to the full range of prayer that 1 Timothy 2:1-2 describes (entreaties, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings) for the full range of those for whom prayer is called (all men, kings and those in authority, the covenant community itself), will find a depth of corporate communion with the living God that the brief, formulaic prayers of many evangelical worship services do not approach. The congregation that sings the theologically rich texts of the Psalms and the church's great confessional hymnody, that teaches its people to mean what they sing and to sing with the full engagement of mind and heart, will find that the singing of corporate worship is one of the most powerful instruments of theological formation and communal strengthening available to the covenant community. And the congregation that observes the Lord's Supper with the regularity, the preparation, and the theological weight that Units 6 and 7 have described will find the covenant renewal that the Supper provides is one of the most sustaining regular acts in its corporate life.

The positive vision of worship renewal is the vision of a congregation that is genuinely encountering the living God in its gathered assembly, that comes to worship with the expectation that God will speak in the reading and preaching of His Word, that He will receive the prayers and songs of the covenant community in whose midst He has promised to dwell, and that He will work through the ordinances by His Spirit to strengthen faith and deepen covenant commitment. This expectation, Spirit-dependent, Word-grounded, covenant-aware, is the expectation that the regulative principle produces in the community that takes seriously the God who prescribed the forms of worship not as institutional constraints on the worshippers' creativity but as the merciful provisions of the One who knows how He is best approached, how His community is best formed, and how the encounter between the finite creature and the infinite Creator is best enabled.

VII. UNIT 9 AND THE SERIES

Worship as the Summary of the Covenant Community's Life

A. *The Three Lessons of Unit 9*

Unit 9 addresses corporate worship across three lessons that together constitute a theological account of the gathered assembly's life before the living God. This lesson has established the regulative principle, the conviction that God prescribes the elements of corporate worship in His Word and that the covenant community's gathered worship should conform to those elements rather than to the creativity of human invention. Lesson 27 will address the centrality of preaching, the Reformation's conviction that the sermon is the main event of the gathered assembly, the primary means by which God addresses His covenant community in corporate worship, and the irreplaceable instrument through which the Spirit works to produce the faith, the knowledge, and the formation that the community's life requires. Lesson 28 will address the role of the other elements of corporate worship, prayer, singing, Scripture reading, and the ordinances, as genuine acts of worship that together with the preached Word constitute the full gathering of the covenant community before the living God.

The three lessons of Unit 9 are not merely an account of what the community does when it gathers; they are the culminating expression of what the entire series has been building toward. The covenant community that has been constituted by the covenantal theology of Units 1-4, governed by the apostolic structures of Unit 5, sealed by the ordinances of Units 6-7, maintained in covenant integrity by the discipline of Unit 8, now gathers in the corporate worship of Unit 9 to do the most fundamental thing it does: to approach the living God in the forms He has prescribed, to hear His Word proclaimed and responded to, and to offer back to Him the worship that is the purpose of its existence. The worship of the covenant community is not one item among many in the community's institutional program; it is the community's primary act, the act from which all other acts derive their meaning and toward which all other acts are ultimately oriented.

The connection between Unit 9's corporate worship and Unit 10's mission is the connection between the community's vertical act (gathering before the living God) and its horizontal act (going out into the world with the gospel). The community that genuinely encounters the living God in its corporate worship is the community that is most fully equipped for the mission to which the encounter sends it: the community whose faith has been strengthened by the preached Word, whose communion with Christ has been deepened by the Lord's Supper, whose prayers have been formed by the corporate intercession of the gathered assembly, and whose understanding has been shaped by the full range of the worship elements the Spirit uses to form the community in the knowledge of God. The worship and the mission are not two separate activities of the covenant community; they are the two dimensions of the life of a community that exists for the glory of the God who created it, redeemed it, and calls it to declare His excellencies to the world He is reconciling to Himself in Christ.

B. *The Doxological Goal of the Whole Series*

This series has been building toward a single, comprehensive vision: the vision of the local church as it was always meant to be. The church that holds the apostolic deposit in its fullness (Unit 1), that understands its own nature and identity as the new covenant community (Units 2-3), that receives its members on the basis of genuine regeneration (Unit 4), that governs itself by the apostolic pattern of elder-led congregationalism (Unit 5), that

seals the covenant in the waters of baptism and at the Lord's Table (Units 6-7), that maintains its covenant integrity through the discipline that love requires (Unit 8), that gathers before the living God in the corporate worship that He has prescribed (Unit 9), and that goes out into the world with the mission that Christ commissioned (Unit 10), this is the church that the entire series has been describing, arguing for, and calling every congregation to embody in its specific, historically located, geographically situated, culturally embedded life.

The doxological goal of the entire ecclesiological project is expressed in the closing doxology that has concluded every lesson in this series: 'Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen' (Ephesians 3:20-21). The glory is in the church. The church that governs, baptizes, communes, disciplines, worships, and missions in faithfulness to the apostolic deposit is the church in which the glory of God is most fully expressed in its institutional form. That expression is not the ultimate purpose of the church, the ultimate purpose is the glory of God Himself, to whom the doxology is addressed. But the church is the means by which that glory is expressed in the present age, and the church that takes its calling seriously is the church that is most fully fulfilling the purpose for which it was purchased, constituted, governed, sealed, maintained, gathered, and sent.

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 4:24, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Regulative Principle of Worship	The conviction that the corporate worship of the church should include only those elements which God has positively commanded in Scripture. Grounded in the second commandment, Deuteronomy 12:32, and Leviticus 10:1-2 (Nadab and Abihu). Formulated in the Westminster Confession (Chapter 21.1): 'the acceptable way of worshiping 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.' Distinguished from the normative principle (which permits whatever Scripture does not explicitly forbid) by the direction of the default: prohibition (nothing permitted unless commanded) rather than permission (everything permitted unless forbidden).
Normative Principle of Worship	The alternative to the regulative principle, held by Lutheran and Anglican traditions: the corporate worship of the church may include anything that Scripture does not explicitly forbid. The default is permission rather than prohibition. The practical consequence: whatever the church does not find specifically condemned in Scripture may be included in corporate worship. The contemporary evangelical church's consumer-driven worship is effectively the normative principle extended to its natural conclusion in a therapeutic, aesthetically driven culture.
Leviticus 10:1-2	The Old Testament's most direct illustration of the regulative principle: Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, offered 'strange fire which He had not commanded them' and were consumed by fire from the presence of the LORD. The specific indictment is that the fire was 'which He had not commanded', not that they had been commanded to offer it differently, but that they had not been commanded at all. The unauthorized worship of the true God provoked the same divine judgment as false worship. Establishes that God determines how He is to be worshipped, not the worshippers.
Deuteronomy 12:32	The most comprehensive Old Testament formulation of the regulative principle: 'Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.' Given in the context of worship, the chapter addresses the destruction of Canaanite worship sites and the establishment of Israel's specific worship in the Promised Land. The 'you shall not add to it nor take away from it' establishes the Scripture's sufficiency as the norm for the covenant community's practice, applied specifically to worship.
Elements of Worship	The substantive acts of the gathered community before God, governed by the regulative principle and requiring positive scriptural authorization. Distinguished from the circumstances of worship (which are governed by prudence). The prescribed elements from the New Testament: the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13), the preaching of the Word (2 Timothy 4:2), prayer (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 2:1-2), the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16), the administration of the ordinances (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26), and the collection of tithes and offerings (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).
Circumstances of Worship	The logistical and contextual details that attend the elements of worship without themselves being the substantive content of worship: the time of gathering, length of service, physical arrangement of the meeting space, use of printed materials, amplification of the spoken Word, accompaniment of singing, etc. Governed by the light of nature and Christian prudence (1689 Confession, Chapter 1.6) rather than by the regulative principle's specific scriptural authorization requirement. The practical application of the elements-circumstances distinction is one of the most contested and most important skills in the theology of corporate worship.
John 4:23-24	Christ's dominical account of what genuine worship requires: 'the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is

	spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.' The two requirements: spirit (genuinely engaged, genuinely addressed to the living God, not performed for the benefit of the human audience) and truth (genuinely informed by the truth of who God is and what He has done, conforming to the reality of the God being worshipped). The regulative principle is the application of the 'truth' requirement to the specific question of which elements may constitute corporate worship.
Second Commandment	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.' The most fundamental principle of the regulative principle: the God who cannot be adequately represented by any created image also cannot be adequately worshipped by any humanly invented form. The prohibition of images is the prohibition of any form of worship that replaces the God-prescribed with the human-invented. The regulative principle is the second commandment applied specifically to corporate worship practice.
Acts 2:42	Luke's enumeration of the apostolic community's characteristic worship practices: 'They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' The four elements, the Word (apostles' teaching), fellowship (koinonia), the ordinance (breaking of bread), and prayer, provide the most concise apostolic description of the covenant community's gathered worship. The regulative principle reads this list as positively prescribing the elements of corporate worship, not merely describing what one particular community happened to do.
Seeker-Sensitive Worship	The model of corporate worship in which the gathered assembly is designed primarily for the benefit of the non-Christian visitor whose comfort and aesthetic preferences determine the form of the service. The regulative principle's most direct critique: this model confuses the purpose of corporate worship (the covenant community's offering to God) with the purpose of evangelistic outreach (the proclamation of the gospel to the unconverted). The worship designed to be attractive to the seeker may fail to be genuine encounter with the living God; the worship designed to be genuinely God-centered will often prove genuinely attractive to the genuinely seeking visitor precisely because genuine encounter with the living God is what genuine seekers are actually seeking.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that God has spoken about how He is to be worshipped, that His Word is sufficient to define the forms in which the covenant community approaches Him, and that the worship shaped by that Word is richer, more profound, more God-glorifying, and ultimately more satisfying to the worshipping community than any worship shaped by human invention. The regulative principle is not a restriction on genuine worship; it is the liberation of worship from the tyranny of human preferences and the anxiety of endless cultural accommodation, and into the security of obedience to the One who has told us how He is to be approached.

We must believe that the elements of corporate worship prescribed in the New Testament, the reading and preaching of the Word, prayer, singing, the ordinances, and the offering, are sufficient for everything the covenant community needs in its corporate encounter with the living God. These elements, faithfully and fully employed, provide the community with everything it needs: the hearing of God's speech, the offering of the community's responsive speech, the enacted proclamation of the gospel, and the material expression of the community's stewardship. Nothing is missing; nothing needs to be supplemented from the resources of human creativity or cultural accommodation.

We must believe that the question of corporate worship is ultimately a question about who is in charge of the encounter between the covenant community and the living God. The regulative principle says: God is in charge; He has spoken about the forms of the encounter; the community's task is to obey, not to invent. The alternative says: the community is in charge; it determines what forms of encounter it finds most meaningful and most engaging; God is a co-participant who accepts whatever the community brings. The regulative principle is not the harshest of these two convictions; it is the most reverent, the most honest, and ultimately the most liberating.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a genuine awe at the privilege of corporate worship, the privilege of a redeemed community being welcomed into the presence of the holy God through the blood of Christ to encounter Him in the forms He has prescribed. The Isaiah 6 vision, the seraphim covering their faces and crying Holy, Holy, Holy, and the prophet falling in devastation at the vision of God's glory, is not a description of what to experience emotionally during Sunday morning worship. But it is the theological reality that should underlie the reverence with which the covenant community approaches its gathered worship, whatever the specific forms the worship takes.

We should feel a genuine desire for the corporate worship of this congregation to be more deeply, more consistently, more joyfully God-centered, less oriented toward the congregation's preferences and more oriented toward the character and the commands of the God who is the worship's only worthy audience. This desire is not a critique of any specific element of the congregation's current practice; it is the constant orientation of the worshipping community toward the God who seeks worshippers who will worship in spirit and truth.

We should desire for the prescribed elements of corporate worship to be practiced with the fullness and the depth that their biblical authorization warrants. Not a minimalist compliance with the required elements, but a rich, full, theologically substantive engagement with each element as the form God has prescribed for a specific dimension of the community's corporate encounter with Him. The worship that takes the public reading of Scripture seriously, that prays with genuine God-directedness, that sings with the full engagement of mind and heart, and

that receives the ordinances with theological preparation and covenant awareness, is the worship that most fully honors the principle it is practicing.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Leviticus 10:1-2 alongside Matthew 4:4 and Deuteronomy 12:32 as a triptych of the regulative principle's biblical foundation. For each text, identify the specific principle it establishes: Leviticus 10:1-2 (the unauthorized worship of the true God is as dangerous as the worship of false gods); Matthew 4:4 (man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, the sufficiency of God's Word for the community's life, including its worship); Deuteronomy 12:32 (you shall not add to nor take away from what God has commanded). How do the three texts together establish the regulative principle as a consistent biblical conviction rather than a Reformation-era theological novelty?
- Evaluate each element of this congregation's current corporate worship service against the positive scriptural warrant test: does each element have a specific New Testament command or apostolic authorization? List every element currently included in the service (sermon, songs, prayers, Scripture reading, offering, Lord's Supper, baptism, announcements, etc.) and for each one, identify either (a) the specific New Testament text that positively authorizes it as an element of corporate worship, or (b) whether it is better understood as a circumstance (governed by prudence) rather than an element (governed by the regulative principle). Bring your analysis to an elder in a constructive, pastorally framed conversation about the congregation's worship practice.
- Read John 4:19-26 this week as a meditation on Jesus' account of what genuine worship requires. Focus specifically on the 'in spirit and truth' of verse 24. What does worship in spirit look like in the context of this congregation's corporate worship, and what are the most common forms of its failure (formalism, emotional performance, distraction)? What does worship in truth look like, and what are the most common forms of its failure (theological ignorance, cultural accommodation, the substitution of emotionally engaging content for theologically true content)?
- Reflect specifically on the role of corporate prayer in this congregation's worship. Is the prayer given the substantive time, the theological depth, and the genuine God-directedness that its character as the covenant community's corporate speech to the living God requires? What specific improvements to the congregation's corporate prayer practice would most directly honor the regulative principle's prescription of prayer as a required element of corporate worship?
- As a synthesis exercise, write a brief (two paragraph) account of the regulative principle as you would explain it to a member of this congregation who has never heard the term, someone who would describe the question of worship as simply 'whatever feels meaningful and genuine.' The account should: (a) state the principle clearly; (b) give its biblical ground in one or two texts; (c) explain what it affirms (richness within the prescribed elements) as well as what it resists (human innovation); and (d) close with the pastoral vision of why this principle is liberating rather than restricting. Bring the account to the next study session.

Key Texts: *Leviticus 10:1–2; Deuteronomy 12:32; John 4:23–24; Colossians 3:16–17; 1 Corinthians 14:26–40; Acts 2:42*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before this lesson, how did you think about the question of what belongs in corporate worship? Was your implicit standard the normative principle (anything not forbidden is permitted) or the regulative principle (only what is commanded is permitted), or something else? How has this lesson changed or clarified your understanding of the standard that should govern the forms of corporate worship?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Leviticus 10:1-5. What exactly did Nadab and Abihu do (verse 1)? What is the specific description of the fire they offered? What happened (verse 2)? What does Moses say to Aaron in verse 3 ('By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored'), and what does this establish about the principle being applied? What was Aaron's response?
- Read Deuteronomy 12:29-32. What is the context of the instruction (verses 29-31)? What does verse 32 command regarding the specific instructions that have been given? What does 'you shall not add to it nor take away from it' establish about the standard for the covenant community's practice? How does this text apply to the question of corporate worship specifically?
- Read John 4:19-26. What question does the woman at the well raise about worship (verse 20)? What does Jesus say about the question of 'where' to worship (verse 21)? What does He say about the 'how' of genuine worship in verses 23-24? What does 'in spirit and truth' mean, and how do the two dimensions relate to each other?
- Read Colossians 3:15-17. What does verse 16 instruct about the content and form of the community's singing? What does verse 17 say about the governing principle for every act? How does the 'word of Christ dwelling richly' in verse 16 function as a regulative principle for the content of corporate singing?
- Read 1 Corinthians 14:26, 33, and 40. What question does verse 26 raise about the ordering of the gathered assembly? What governing principle does verse 33 establish about the character of the God who authorizes corporate worship? What practical instruction does verse 40 give? How do these three verses together establish the principle that corporate worship must be ordered by the character and the commands of the God it addresses?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the regulative principle and the normative principle differ in the direction of their default: prohibition (regulative) vs. permission (normative). Is this distinction as significant as the lesson claims? Can you think of specific examples from contemporary evangelical worship practice where the two principles would produce different results? Which principle do you find more faithful to the biblical account of God's character and the covenant community's responsibility in worship?
- The lesson distinguishes between elements (governed by the regulative principle) and circumstances (governed by prudence). This distinction is clearly important to the practical application of the regulative principle, but is it clear enough to be practically useful? How would you determine whether musical instruments in corporate worship are an element (requiring specific scriptural authorization) or a circumstance (appropriately governed by prudence)? What criteria would you use?

- The lesson argues that the contemporary evangelical church's seeker-sensitive worship is 'a category error about who corporate worship is for.' Is this a fair characterization? Is there a version of outward-facing, visitor-welcoming corporate worship that is consistent with the regulative principle? Or does the regulative principle necessarily produce a worship style that is entirely oriented toward the gathered covenant community rather than toward the potential visitor?
- The lesson argues that the prescribed elements of corporate worship are sufficient for everything the covenant community needs in its corporate encounter with God, that nothing is missing and nothing needs to be supplemented. Is this claim persuasive? Are there legitimate aspects of the covenant community's corporate life that the six prescribed elements do not address and that require additional elements? Or can all legitimate corporate activities be categorized either as prescribed elements, as circumstances attending those elements, or as activities that appropriately fall outside the category of corporate worship?
- The lesson identifies the contemporary evangelical church's worship crisis as primarily a failure of the regulative principle: the substitution of what is humanly attractive for what God has prescribed. Is this diagnosis adequate, or is it too simple? Are there other factors in the contemporary worship crisis, pastoral, sociological, historical, or spiritual, that the regulative principle's framework does not adequately address?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- If the elders of this congregation were to apply the positive scriptural warrant test to every element of the current Sunday morning service, which elements would pass the test without difficulty, which would require more careful assessment of whether they are elements or circumstances, and which might be identified as genuinely lacking positive scriptural authorization as elements of corporate worship? How should the congregation proceed if a specific element is identified as lacking the required authorization?
- The lesson describes the worship renewal that a faithful application of the regulative principle makes possible: the public reading of Scripture taken seriously, the sermon expounding the text with theological depth, the prayers offered with genuine God-directedness, the singing engaging the full person with theologically rich texts, the ordinances received with covenant awareness and theological preparation. How closely does this congregation's current worship approach this vision? Which element is most developed and which most needs the renewal the lesson describes?
- The regulative principle requires courage as well as conviction: the courage to resist the cultural pressure toward worship practices that are attractive, contemporary, and emotionally engaging but that lack positive scriptural authorization. Is this congregation experiencing this cultural pressure? What specific forms does it take, and how have the elders and the congregation responded to it? What would a faithful application of the regulative principle's resistance look like in this congregation's specific cultural context?
- The lesson identifies the doxological goal of the entire series: 'to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus.' How does the regulative principle serve this goal? How does the worship designed by God's prescription rather than human invention most directly serve the glory of the God who prescribes it? What is the connection between the regulative principle's submission to God's authority over the forms of worship and the doxological vision of the whole ecclesiological project?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Isaiah 6:1-8 aloud, the vision that establishes more vividly than any other text in all of Scripture the stakes of the covenant community's approach to the living God in corporate worship: 'In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory. And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.' Pause. Then the seraph with the burning coal: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven.' This is the encounter that corporate worship enacts in its own form: the covenant community of redeemed sinners, who know the weight of the prophet's cry and have experienced the grace of the coal's cleansing, gathered before the holy God whose train fills the temple and whose holiness fills the earth. Let the full weight of that encounter, the holiness, the devastation, and the grace, shape the prayers that follow.

Pray for this congregation's corporate worship with the Isaiah 6 vision as the frame. Pray that the reading and preaching of the Word would be the community's encounter with the God who speaks, that the preacher would stand in the place of the seraphim, declaring what the Word declares about the holy God, and that the congregation would receive the Word with the attentiveness of those who know they are hearing the speech of the King, the LORD of hosts. Pray that the corporate prayer would be genuine speech to the living God rather than a liturgical performance for the human audience, that the community would pray with the awareness that it is addressing the One before whom Isaiah fell down in devastation and to whom the seraphim cover their faces. Pray that the singing would be the community's genuine response to the character and the acts of God, theologically true, spiritually engaged, genuinely addressed to the One whose glory fills the earth.

Pray for the broader renewal of corporate worship in the evangelical church. Pray for the many pastors and elders who are working, often against the grain of their congregational culture and their denominational environment, to recover the God-centered, Word-saturated, spirit-and-truth corporate worship that the regulative principle describes. Pray for the congregations they serve, that they would receive the recovery of genuine worship not as a diminishment of what they have been accustomed to but as the enrichment of the encounter they have been seeking, the discovery that the worship shaped by God's prescription is richer, more profound, and more genuinely satisfying than the worship shaped by human preference. Pray for the wisdom and the courage required for the specific decisions about worship elements that the application of the regulative principle demands in specific congregational contexts.

Close with the doxological prayer that has closed every lesson of this series, receiving it now in the context of Unit 9's worship theology: 'Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.' The glory is in the church. The church gathered in the corporate worship that God has prescribed, reading the Word, preaching the gospel, praying with God-directed earnestness, singing the truths of the apostolic deposit, receiving the ordinances with covenant seriousness, is the church in which the glory of God is being

expressed in its most institutional and most regular form. To this worship, and to the God who receives it, belongs every praise.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Leviticus 10:1–2; Deuteronomy 12:32; John 4:23–24; Colossians 3:16–17; 1 Corinthians 14:26–40; Acts 2:42

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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