



How then shall we meet?

**Evaluating the relative merits of the regulative and normative
principles for gathered worship**

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1. Introduction

What does a brand-new inner-city church plant in Auckland, a 75-year old mainline parish in Brisbane, and a secret gathering of underground believers in China share in common? Each must decide on when, where and how often to meet, as well as what to do during their time together. However, Scripture lacks a clearly presented model or instructions for an entire Christian worship service.¹ What then should be included? What is to be left out? To answer these questions, Christians have historically leaned towards one of two approaches: the regulative principle, and the normative principle. After some preliminary thoughts regarding worship in general, this paper will outline the relative merits of each principle with reference to their historical and theological foundations. From this reflection, I will suggest principles which can be applied to our contemporary worship gatherings.

2. Worship: preliminary thoughts and definitions

It is first necessary to define worship itself, given that every reader has their own ideas, vocabularies and received traditions. Some define worship as the specific event when Christians meet together (e.g. “a worship service”), or as the time of singing during that meeting (e.g. “the worship time”), or as a specific musical style

¹ Don Carson, *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 21, notes that “we have no detailed *first-century* evidence of an entire Christian service.” For an overview of the worship life of early Christians, see Andrew B. McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

(e.g. “worship music”). Others eschew the term altogether and emphasise its meaning as an all-of-life response to God’s mercy (Rom 12:1–2), opting for alternative words to describe what occurs during their “meetings” or “gatherings”.²

What is undeniably true, however, is that worship is a major theme woven throughout the storyline of Scripture.³ Every human, created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26), pours themselves out towards someone or something,⁴ whether by physical acts of homage,⁵ or by total devotion of heart and mind, soul and strength (Deut 6:4–5, Mk 12:29–30). When this outpouring is skewed away from God alone, it is idolatry; when directed to Him as “the celebrative response to what God has done, is doing, and promises to do”,⁶ it is genuine worship.

As Yahweh called His people — first in Eden, then in Israel, then in exile — to worship Him through adoration and action,⁷ He now calls His church, through Christ, to “continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge His name [i.e. adoration]”, yet also not neglecting “to do good and to share what you have...[i.e. action]” (Heb 13:15–16). These rhythms of

² E.g. Tony Payne, *The Tony Payne Collection* (Kingsford, Sydney: Matthias Media, 2017), 275-333, who consistently avoids using the term “worship” to refer to a specific corporate gathering. Payne’s view is shared by many within Sydney evangelical circles.

³ For a comprehensive biblical theology of worship, see David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2002).

⁴ Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2003), 10, expands on this point: “As God eternally outpours within his triune self, and as we are created in his image, it follows that we too are continuous outpourers, incurably so.”

⁵ As demonstrated by the Hebrew and Greek words used to describe worship: השתחווה (“to bow down”) and προσκυνέω (“to prostrate oneself”).

⁶ John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 31.

⁷ There are numerous references, but a good representation are Exodus 20:1–17, Deuteronomy 4:15–20, Psalm 95, Matthew 4:9–10, as well as the prophetic writers who chastise Israel for their hypocritical worship practices (e.g. Malachi 1:6–8).

worship occur when Christians are scattered, yet more intentionally when gathered.⁸ Therefore, while the following discussion will address principles to inform our gathered worship, it is worth remembering that they are principles which are applicable to all of life as well.

3.1. The regulative principle of worship

Simply stated, the regulative principle teaches that only what Scripture commands is required for the Christian life. John Girardeau’s classic definition of the regulative principle is as follows: “A divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements, is forbidden.”⁹ Adherents to the regulative principle therefore adopt a “red-light view”¹⁰ where each aspect in the corporate worship of God must be “founded positively on the directions of Scripture.”¹¹

⁸ Mike Cospers, *Rhythms of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 73–90, suggests a “Worship One, Two, Three” framework that cuts through much of the confusion in worship terminology. In short, he states that worship has One object and author (the Triune God), Two contexts (when gathered, and when scattered), and Three audiences (God, the church, and the watching world).

⁹ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (1888; repr. Edmonton, AB: Still Water Revival, 2010), 9. Cited in Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 429.

¹⁰ Mark Driscoll, *Religion Saves* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 252.

¹¹ J. Ligon Duncan III, “Does God Care How We Worship?,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 21.



Figure 1: The suspension bridge, a metaphor for the regulative principle of worship.

A helpful approach is to visualise the regulative principle as a suspension bridge (Figure 1).¹² The structure is comprised of two immovable towers: explicit Biblical commands, and relevant Biblical principles. The rest of the bridge holds together with suspension cables, analogous to the many individual decisions on how to apply the durability and stability of the Bible to all aspects of our gatherings.

For example,¹³ suppose that you are responsible for planning worship meetings in your church. An enthusiastic member suggests: “Could we add a five-minute coffee break between the singing and the sermon?” Finding no scriptural warrant

¹² I have adapted this illustration from Ron Man, “The Bridge: Worship Between Bible and Culture”, in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 18, though he does not choose to call it the regulative principle.

¹³ I’m grateful for David Burge who first suggested this litmus test.

for it and desiring to free more time for corporate prayer, an advocate of the regulative principle would oppose its inclusion.¹⁴

3.2. Regulative principle: historical and theological foundations

The regulative principle was formulated during the Reformation, when pastors such as Martin Luther¹⁵ sought to steer worshippers away from the superstitious practices of the Roman Catholic Mass and its minimisation of the preached Word of God.¹⁶ The issue arose regarding to what extent one should go in renovating the Protestant church's corporate worship. Of the early Reformers, it was Calvin who first expressed the regulative principle in his 1543 treatise, *On the Necessity of Reforming the Church*:

“The rule that distinguishes between pure and vitiated [impaired] worship is of universal application... Justly, therefore, does the Lord, in order to assert his full right of dominion, strictly enjoin what he wishes us to do, and at once reject all human devices which are at variance with his command. Justly, too, does he, in express terms, define our limits, that we may not, by fabricating perverse modes of worship, provoke his anger against us.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Though it could be possible to argue for the break as an opportunity to practice the Biblical command of “showing hospitality to one another” (Heb 13:2) in the immediate context of worshipping the LORD with reverence and awe (Heb 12:28).

¹⁵ See his thoughts in *The German Mass and Order of Divine Service* (Wittenberg: 1526).

¹⁶ Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 665.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1543), in *Tracts Relating to the Reformation, Volume 1* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 128. Retrieved from: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112040143080>.

A century later, the Westminster Assembly captured the mature thought and practice of English and Scottish Puritans under three of their Confessions of Faith: firstly, that the worship of God must be regulated only by the express commands or necessary implications of Scripture;¹⁸ secondly, that nothing contrary to God's Word may be binding upon true worshippers of God;¹⁹ and thirdly, that God determines and reveals in His Word what pleases Him in "religious worship":

"The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself. It is 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 representations or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures."²⁰

Under this third point, Westminster divines agreed on the following prescribed "parts" (or "elements") of religious worship:²¹ prayer, the reading of Scriptures, the "sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word", psalm singing, and administering and receiving "the sacraments instituted by Christ".²² Later Puritan

¹⁸ WCF 1.6: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for [God's] own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men..."

¹⁹ WCF 20.2: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship."

²⁰ WCF 21.1.

²¹ WCF 21.3–4 for prayer, and 21.5 for the remainder.

²² WCF 21.3–5. Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 59, reminds us that "even such honored divines were not uniform in their perspectives...", citing the issue of Scottish and English ministers disagreeing on the specifics of administering the Lord's Supper. It is also instructive to note that, although a Westminster Liturgy containing specific practices was also subsequently produced, has not remained in use throughout the Reformed church community today.

writings²³ would elaborate on how these practices should be conducted, and whether other activities (e.g. singing hymns, use of creeds) were divinely warranted “elements”, or if they were “circumstances” or “accidents” that could be ordered by “the light of nature, and Christian prudence,”²⁴ or if they ought to be excluded. The regulative principle continues to shape the corporate worship of many Presbyterian, Congregational, Continental Reformed and Reformed Baptist churches today.²⁵

3.3. Relative merits of the regulative principle

There is much to commend about the regulative principle as originally formulated by the Westminster Divines.²⁶ Firstly, it seeks to uphold a God-centred approach to our worship. True worship involves outpouring our joy and delight to God, and seeking to honour Him in everything we do. Scripture consistently records God’s condemnation of “self-made” religion (Col 2:23), and reminds us that He will not give His glory to anyone else (Is 42:8). The stories of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:3–8), the first two Commandments (Ex 20:2–6), the result of Nadab and Abihu’s strange fire (Lev 10), and many other examples warn us that Yahweh has always been

²³ For five representative examples, refer to Section 2 of Iain H. Murray’s *The Reformation of the Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007).

²⁴ WCF 1.6.

²⁵ See chapter 22 of the Savoy Declaration and the 2nd London Baptist Confession.

²⁶ As opposed to work of some subsequent Puritans who sought to spell out every element and circumstance in an atomistic manner. For a full treatment of this broader view of the regulative principle, see John Frame, “A Fresh Look at the Regulative Principle: A Broader View” (unpublished), retrieved from <https://frame-poythress.org/a-fresh-look-at-the-regulative-principle-a-broader-view/>.

concerned with how we worship Him. The regulative principle aims to uphold this high view of God when we gather in His name by insisting that what we do together glorifies Him foremost.

Secondly, it seeks to uphold a Word-centred approach to our gathered worship. By affirming *sola scriptura* — that Scripture is our supreme and sufficient authority in all matters of faith and life (2 Tim 3:16–17) — in deciding what to include in our gatherings, worshippers are assured that everything they are asked to participate in has a clear Biblical basis. Therefore, we can confidently invite our churches to do many things:²⁷ greet one another (e.g. Rom 15:33, 1 Cor 16:23–24, 2 Cor 13:14), read scripture (1 Tim 4:13), hear God’s Word preached (2 Tim 2:2), pray (Acts 2:42, 1 Cor 14:16, 1 Tim 2:1–2), sing to one another (Eph 5:19–20, Col 3:16), and to profess our faith corporately (Rom 10:9–10, 1 Jn 4:2–3). Historically, Nonconformists appealed to the regulative principle to oppose the overreach of a state church that required conformity to ceremonies that were not commanded in Scripture.²⁸ In our individualistic age where new ideas and innovations are adopted uncritically within churches, the regulative principle can serve as a helpful bulwark against blind conformity to pragmatic or syncretistic practices taken from the wider culture or other religions.²⁹

²⁷ This is an abbreviated and adapted selection from John Frame’s list of what to do in worship, in *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 55–62.

²⁸ Frame, *Worship*, 43–44.

²⁹ Recent examples of pragmatic practices include seeker-oriented worship services, the use of secular music in worship, and “virtual church”. Some examples of syncretistic practices include prayer labyrinths, transcendental meditation, and the inclusion of prayers from other religious faiths.

Having reviewed its strengths, it is worth remembering that the regulative principle of worship is a derivation of biblical principles and not meant to replace them. A slavish use of the regulative principle that atomises every item in our worship gatherings into elements and circumstances seems to go beyond the direct commands of Scripture. Instead of a suspension bridge, one would be building something to a historic stone bridge (Figure 2): solid and dependable, yet monolithic in character and difficult to adjust to changes in the surrounding area.



Figure 2: A slavish application of the regulative principle is akin to a historic stone bridge.

In addition, we must acknowledge there are many issues without an explicit command in Scripture that still requires a regulation, not indifference. Christians must still make many spiritually-significant decisions that, while without explicit Scriptural warrant, will still be prayerful application of other biblical guidelines (e.g. Paul’s injunction that “all things be done for building up”, 1 Cor 14:26b). There is no Biblical command concerning what time of day to meet, nor which location, or which language to conduct the service in, or the style of music, or which passage to

preach from, or whether to project song lyrics, and so on. For example, a gathering of Masai Christians will rightly sing, but may elect to use the musical styles and instruments from their own culture.³⁰ It is unhelpful, as some Puritans have argued, to define these as “circumstances” without religious significance.³¹ For instance, scheduling a service at 3am will undoubtedly affect the quality of worship and edification taking place!³² By prescribing our worship together as far as Scripture commands, and inviting biblical wisdom for other matters, the regulative principle — rightly understood — is a freeing one.

3. The normative principle of worship

Simply stated, the normative principle teaches that whatever Scripture does not forbid is permissible for the Christian life. A succinct definition is seen in Article XX of the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles: “The Church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word

³⁰ On this issue I depart from strict adherents of the regulative principle who argue that singing is a discrete “element” of worship and therefore must be regulated to exclude certain musical styles and instruments. I side with Frame, *Worship*, 57, in seeing song as a means of prayer and teaching. In both NT commands about singing, the primary instruction seems to be “addressing one another” (Eph 5:19) and to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16), with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs being the means of doing so. Therefore, I believe church musicians have the freedom to use thoughtful instrumentation that supports congregational singing in their context.

³¹ The full argument is that, since WCF 1.6 notes that “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church”, and that they are “common to human actions and societies”, these “circumstances” are secular matters devoid of religious significance. See Darryl Hart and John Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 85–86.

³² Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*, 40.

written...”³³ Applied to gathered worship, then, those who follow the normative principle adopt a “green-light view”³⁴ where Christians may worship in any way that is not forbidden by Scripture.

To illustrate (Figure 3), it is worth visualising the normative principle as a rope bridge. It is minimally attached at either end to the ground (to avoid what God forbids). Otherwise, it is held together by flexible rope tied in all kinds of ways. The bridge can be set up in a variety of places and locations quickly (ease of contextualisation), but is prone to swaying and possibly snapping under strong wind currents (risks being ruled by cultural norms).

For instance, you have the privilege of discipling a small group of house church Christians. A new convert asks: “Can we act out the Bible stories when we meet, just like the storytelling we do in our tribal meetings?” Finding no Scripture forbidding the dramatisation of Scripture in gathered worship, a follower of the normative principle would encourage the practice.³⁵

³³ Cited in the Book of Common Prayer (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, n.d.), 693.

³⁴ Mark Driscoll, *Religion Saves* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 251.

³⁵ E.g. Pam Wilson, “Parables Through Dance”, in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 342, describes her experience of incorporating folk dance into gathered worship among Turkish believers.



Figure 3: The normative principle of worship may be visualised as a rope bridge.

3.1. Historical and theological foundations

The normative principle represents the more permissive approach to the Reformation question regarding the extent one should reform the Roman Catholic liturgy. Whereas English Calvinists such as Thomas Cartwright insisted that “we have a word of God for our direction in all things which we have to do”,³⁶ Lutherans³⁷ and Anglicans³⁸ in particular argued that any issue neither commanded nor prohibited by God’s Word was considered *adiaphora*, and could be legitimately ruled upon by the church. In response to his regulative opponents, Richard Hooker argued as follows:

³⁶ E.g. Cartwright’s *Helps for Discovery of the Truth in Point of Toleration* (London: Thomas Banks, 1647), 1. Retrieved from: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A80850.0001.001>.

³⁷ See their *Formula of Concord*, article 10[4], “Of Church Rites”, which states: “We believe, teach and confess that the congregation of God of every place and every time has the power, according to its circumstances, to change such ceremonies in such manner as may be most useful and edifying to the congregation of God.”

³⁸ As quoted above.

“For our constant persuasion in this point is as theirs, that we have nowhere altered the laws of Christ farther than in such particularities only as have the nature of things changeable according to the difference of times, places, persons and other the like circumstances... Whatsoever Christ hath commanded for ever to be kept in his Church, the same we take not upon us to abrogate; and whatsoever our laws have thereunto added besides [e.g. the Anglican liturgy]; of such quality we hope it is as no law of Christ doth anywhere condemn.”³⁹

In other words, Hooker appealed to the church’s right to institute and add to its corporate worship, so long these additional aspects are not condemned the commands of Jesus. His arguments presupposed a lesser relevance for the law of Moses among new Covenant believers,⁴⁰ and emphasised our Christian freedom in organising the affairs of the church.

It is worth noting that those who defended the normative principle during the English Reformation were apologists for continuity with the established church. Advocates appealed to a “rule of edification”: namely, that Christians should keep worshipping according to the Church of England’s liturgy because it maintained

³⁹ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: The Third Book* (1594), in *Ecclesiastical Polity Volume I* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1907) 349.

⁴⁰ E.g. *Of the Laws*, 337–338: “That Christ did not mean to set down particular laws for all things in such sort as Moses did, the very different many of delivering the laws of Moses and the laws of Christ doth plainly shew. Moses had commandment to gather the ordinances of God together distinctly, and orderly to set them down according unto their several kinds... Contrariwise the laws of Christ we find rather mentioned by occasion in the writings of the Apostles...”

peace, thereby building them up.⁴¹ Though many oceans and eras removed, Sydney evangelical Tony Payne’s spells out a surprisingly similar mantra when, drawing from 1 Corinthians 14:26, he advocates that we “do that which builds; don’t do that which does not build.”⁴² Additionally, those today who advocate the use of seeker-oriented activities and forms not described in Scripture are, in essence, applying the normative principle of worship.

3.2. Relative merits

There is likewise much to commend about the normative principle (whether explicitly or implicitly adopted). Several benefits are evident with this approach.

Firstly, it affords church leaders, missionaries and local believers express permission to contextualise their worship services to their surrounding culture. Even with occasional nature of the New Testament epistles in mind, the absence of detailed instructions, structures or liturgies is striking. Whereas Old Testament worship of Yahweh was bound up in a single culture and location (Jerusalem), Jesus Christ ushers in true worship of the Father “in spirit and truth” (John 4:22–24) with a gospel message that must go out to the ends of the earth (Matthew

⁴¹ E.g. John Whitgift’s reply to Thomas Cartwright in *Whitgift’s Works Volume II*, 61: “Such lawes and orders as keep godly peace and unity in the church do edify; but the laws for apparel keep godly peace and unity in the church; ergo, they edify.” Cited by W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 108. My view is that this seems to import a different understanding of edification to 1 Corinthians 14:26.

⁴² Tony Payne, “Regulative or Normative?” *The Briefing*, 20 February 2009. Retrieved from: <https://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2009/02/regulative-or-normative/>. My main criticism with privileging edification is that it treats human opinion and preference as a ruling norm, over and above God’s opinion.

28:19–20). Piper suggests this move from “come and see” worship to “go and tell” necessitates “frightening freedom” in corporate worship:

“We must not lock this gospel treasure in any cultural straitjacket. Rather let us find the place, the time, the dress, the forms, and the music and kindle and carry a passion for the supremacy of God in all things.”⁴³

The normative principle encourages Christians to use Biblical wisdom to craft worship gatherings that are God-centred, Christ-exalting and culturally relevant - whether among shopworkers in Taipei, or villagers in Gonzanama. With this permissiveness comes a responsibility to ensure culture does not become a ruling norm over Scripture, and to prevent aspects of worship not mentioned in Scripture to crowd out those that are.⁴⁴

A second related advantage of the normative principle is that it treats worship consistently with the other aspects of our life. Scripture spells out broad principles related to work, study, parenting, marriage and relationships, from which Christians will carefully apply them to their own situations.⁴⁵ For example, there is no regulative principle for marriage where I may only do what Scripture explicitly commands about husbands and wives. Rather, I’m specifically commanded to love my wife sacrificially as Christ did with His bride, but given the freedom to carefully

⁴³ John Piper, “The Missional Impulse Toward Incarnational Worship in the New Testament”, in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 102.

⁴⁴ E.g. church services that afford little time and effort to the sermon, yet always include dramatic liturgy or a special musical item.

⁴⁵ Though Frame, *Worship*, 40–42, does pick up on this correlation when he advocates for the use of the term “application” instead of “circumstance” to describe the sphere of human judgement we use to determine specifics.

discern the best way to demonstrate this in hundreds of novel and unscripted ways.⁴⁶

Regardless of how one makes choices about gathered worship, Carson offers the helpful observation that “theologically rich and serious services from both camps often have more common *content* than either side usually acknowledges...”⁴⁷ So long as Christians intentionally seek to order their worship under the authority of Scripture, the difference between either principle is likely by degree rather than a reductionistic binary choice concerning fidelity to God’s Word.

4. Some principles for gathered worship today

We have surveyed both the regulative and normative principles as they pertain to Christian worship. The regulative principle — rightly understood — seeks to uphold a God-glorifying and Word-centred approach to our church services, while the normative principle encourages creative contextualisation and a consistent hermeneutical approach to gathered and scattered worship. Provided that pastors, missionaries, worship leaders and service planners exercise discernment and wisdom, both principles can serve as helpful bridges to support the growth of

⁴⁶ Additionally, given Jesus’s declaration to the Samaritan woman that true worship is no longer fixed on a place, but in a Person (John 4:22–24), it seems curious that an hour of gathered worship on Sunday should be more stringently regulated than the rest of the week. This bifurcation often causes people to treat corporate worship (or a certain aspect of it) as more sanctified than the rest of our day-to-day lives of worship.

⁴⁷ Carson, *Worship*, 55.

corporate worship that glorifies God and edifies His people.⁴⁸ In closing, I offer some personal reflections applicable to our contemporary worship gatherings.

4.1. Use both the accelerator and brake

In my previous experience of leading and planning corporate worship,⁴⁹ I have sought (often unsuccessfully) to find the balance between maximising what God requires, and encouraging new ideas within worship communities. Just as one needs both the accelerator and brake to drive a car well, both regulative and normative impulses are helpful in order to drive our gathered worship well.

Therefore, the wise pastor or service leader will order gathered worship in a way that does what Scripture clearly commands, avoids what it clearly forbids, and uses biblical wisdom for everything else.⁵⁰

For example, at my current church,⁵¹ service leaders include an open mic time where anyone is welcome to share “community news”, followed by an intercessory prayer with those things in view. The time is regulated, yet members are free to share prayers needs, thoughts from last week’s sermon, upcoming events, or what God has been teaching them.

⁴⁸ My experience is that even churches that apply a Puritan regulative (i.e. “stone bridge”) approach often have a rich and vibrant culture of congregational singing, biblical prayer and faithful preaching in their gathered worship.

⁴⁹ I have been involved in worship music leading, service planning, corporate prayer, and Scripture reading in local church and parachurch meetings since 2003.

⁵⁰ Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 155.

⁵¹ Petersham Baptist Church in Sydney, Australia.

4.2. Learn from friends who hold the other principle

Whether we lean towards the regulative or normative principle in our worship, we should be willing to learn from others. Those of us (including myself) who appeal to the regulative principle can benefit from what other churches do together, just as those who lean towards the normative principle gain much from listening in to the practices of biblically regulative churches.⁵² While my Christian experience has been in a general Baptist context, I have benefitted from the wisdom of other traditions and liturgies as they seek to rehearse the gospel in their church meetings.⁵³ The danger of being too inward-focused or insistent on our church's worship habits is that we risk closing our eyes to the richness in how our brothers and sisters – across the street and around the world – gather to praise the same God, by the same Christ, through the same Spirit.⁵⁴

⁵² Kauflin, *ibid.*, 156, shares how he has similarly benefitted from dialoguing about worship across different church traditions: “Rather than just endlessly discussing disagreements, we try to learn what the other might have that we don’t.”

⁵³ Over the years, I have learned from, and appropriated helpful practices from sources including: the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, the Westminster Confession of Faith, Arthur Bennett’s *Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers*, Bryan Chappell’s “gospel-shaped worship” paradigm, Dave Clancey’s various frameworks for shaping services (sin/grace, problem/solution, God’s Word/our response), and others.

⁵⁴ This is not to negate the presence of many “worship gatherings” that pervert the gospel or practice the forms but do not believe its content.

4.3. Remember Jesus is our perfect Worship Leader

Finally, most readers will be part of regular worship gatherings with established liturgies and traditions,⁵⁵ where it is rare for everything that occurs to consistently resonate with our current concerns, felt needs, or cultural background. While it may be helpful and necessary to suggest ideas for change (whether to be more “regulated” or more permissive), we should never want our preferred way of doing things to overshadow the reality that all our worship is already acceptable to God through the finished work of Christ (Heb 10:19–25). As we meet weekly with the assurance that Jesus’s faithfulness — not the precision or richness of our worship services — draws us to the Father, we can equally anticipate the worship gatherings in the new heavens and earth (Rev 5:1–12), when every nation, tribe and tongue will declare the worthiness of the Lamb who was slain: Jesus, our perfect Worship Leader.

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⁵⁵ Whether codified formally, like the Book of Common Prayer, or implicitly understood, like the inability to sing more than one song in a row at college chapels!

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