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THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP:
ITS SIXTEENTH CENTURY ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT
AMONG THE ENGLISH PURITANS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	DURING THE REIGN OF HENRY VIII.....	1
	A. The Beginning of Puritanism.....	2
	B. The Early Articles.....	3
	C. The Incident of John Hooper.....	6
III.	DURING THE REIGN OF EDWARD VI.....	8
IV.	DURING THE REIGN OF ELIZABETH.....	8
	A. The Thirty-Nine Articles.....	9
	B. The Admonition to the Parliament	9
	C. Diciplina.....	10
V.	CONCLUSION.....	11

Introduction

In a world where the classical and contemporary usually clash, the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) has had the rare quality of being cherished by many worshippers of modern times and yesteryear alike. A simple Internet search of the topic shows that it is currently a hot topic and is doggedly held by many. Yet support for the RPW is not limited to contemporary times, as over four centuries of supporters will verify.

What is meant by the “Regulative Principle of Worship?” The Westminster Confession of Faith renders the RPW in these words:

[T]he acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped 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.¹

Put briefly, in worship “whatever is not enjoined by Scripture (whether by command, example, or by deduction from broader principles) is forbidden.”²

In reviewing its history one finds that “[t]he Regulative Principle was given its classical and definitive statement in the reformed Confessions formulated in the 17th century . . .”³ and is found in both the Westminster Confession and the 1689 Baptist Confession. These depict the Principle in its mature form, but where did the Principle originate, and how did it develop into this definitive form?

During the Reign of Henry VIII

As stated earlier, the Regulative Principle of Worship would find its definitive expression in the seventeenth century. However, its origin and development date back to the previous

¹ Westminster Confession, Chapter XXI.1, as given by Terry L. Johnson, *Reformed Worship* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Books, 2000), 25.

² Johnson, 25.

century and are inseparably intertwined in the English Puritan movement. As such, tracing the growth of the RPW will closely track the earliest history of the Puritans and the heresies – at least from their viewpoint – which they fought.

The Beginning of Puritanism

According to Professor G. M. Trevelyan, Puritanism is “the religion of all those who wished either to purify the usage of the Established Church from the taint of Papacy, or to worship separately by forms so purified.”⁴ The term “Puritan” was not used until 1567,⁵ yet “[t]he story of English Puritanism is best begun in 1524 . . . [when] William Tyndale decided to leave London for Germany in order to prepare an English translation of the Bible”⁶ – a trip necessitated by the establish church’s resistance towards this project. Bremer concurs with Knappen’s opinion, noting that it “has the merit of identifying as the earliest and most constant characteristic of Puritanism the belief that the Church of England had not been sufficiently purged of the theology and worship of Roman Catholicism.”⁷

Lloyd-Jones similarly concludes “[t]he notion of an incomplete Reformation . . . is the essential and most characteristic note of Puritanism – the feeling that the Reformation had not gone far enough” in England.⁸ Thomas Hooker, the preacher who later founded Connecticut, expressed his agreement somewhat more graphically when he stated Henry VIII’s mistake was that “he cut off the head of Popery, but left the body of it yet within his realm!”⁹

³ C. Matthew McMahon, “The Regulative Principle in Worship,” available from http://www.apuritansmind.com/Puritan_Worship/McMahonRegulativePrinciple.htm; Internet; Accessed 21 April 2004.

⁴ John Marlowe, *The Puritan Tradition in English Life* (London: The Cresset Press, 1956), 8.

⁵ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 240.

⁶ M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1939), 3; Lloyd-Jones, 240.

⁷ Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment* (NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1976), 4.

⁸ Lloyd-Jones, 242.

⁹ Bremer, 4.

Although hardly recognizable in such an embryonic stage, the slightest elements of RPW may be hinted at even this early. The RPW, as shall be seen, has at its very core the protest against extra-Biblical elements in worship, which was the same argument behind the fight against this incomplete severance with Rome.

The Early Articles

As is well known, the Anglican separation from the Roman Church in 1529 was occasioned by the pope's refusal to grant Henry VIII an annulment for his marriage to Catherine. Henry had no argument with Catholicism per sé, and in fact, "[a]t no time did he admit that in creed he was anything but an orthodox Catholic. . . ."¹⁰ Nevertheless, Henry's decisions on religious issues was influenced by the fickle tide of various political and other factors affecting his realm, even at times persuading him to support anti-Catholic measures.

To the reformers' delight within a decade of Henry's break with the Roman church the Ten Articles were enacted (1536).¹¹ This and similar reforms addressed several thorny issues: The doctrine of purgatory and the worship of the saints were dropped; relics, images and pilgrimages were discouraged; some old ceremonies were retained, but people were now taught their meaning; and the availability of Bibles in the vernacular was granted.¹² Because of these changes many of the reformers considered the monarch a genuine ally to their cause.

However, the pendulum would soon swing the opposite direction. Only three years later (1539) the Six Articles, called "the whip with six strings"¹³ by the Puritans, shattered the reformers' disillusionment. These Articles made capital offenses of reformation-backed changes

¹⁰ Knappen, 33.

¹¹ Called "the first confession issued by the English Church. . . ." Edgar C. S. Gibson, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: Methuen & Co., 1902), 3.

¹² Knappen, 51.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

such as denying either transubstantiation or the need for auricular confession, the breaking of chastity vows by the priests,¹⁴ and allowing the laity to partake of both elements in the mass.

Oddly enough this anti-reformation edict may have given the reformers a huge incentive for continuing their fight. Knappen notes,

The period of the persecution was, however, productive of fundamental change. . . . To the basic pattern of Puritanism . . . there was added another characteristic attitude which was to be important throughout its history – opposition to religious ceremonialism.¹⁵

Later in his somewhat lengthy discussion on this subject Knappen adds,

From this beginning a new theory of reformation was developed – a theory which was to be standard equipment for the Puritan party throughout its history. The assault was no longer directed at the Catholic religion as a separate and established institution . . . but against the remnants of Catholicism in a church already partially reformed.¹⁶

Knappen then addresses issues more closely related to the RPW:

As a corollary to this teaching, the principle was laid down that instead of the papal standards true Christians should accept the biblical one of the teaching of Christ and the early church. In the New Testament there was no approval of complicated rituals such as were required in the Catholic system.¹⁷

Such a perspective is the substance of the Regulative Principle of Worship, and dates back before the middle of the sixteenth century. It might be fair to consider this the birth of the RPW proper.

A point of explanation should be made at this point. “Ceremonial,” as referred to by Knappen above and as used by the Puritans, apparently came from the medieval exegetical practice of subdividing OT ordinances into three categories. These three categories are: Moral laws (which were still binding), judicial laws (those pertaining only to the Jewish civil government), and ceremonial laws. This later group referred to . . .

. . . the signs in the Hebrew worship typifying the coming Messiah. These last ceased to be of any force with the coming of the Savior whom they foreshadowed. To retain such

¹⁴ Under the reformation many of those having made vows of chastity were abandoning them and marrying.

¹⁵ Knappen, 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., 66.

practices after the substance was come, or to employ devices taken over from pagan worship was to offer insult to the great sacrifices already made.”¹⁸

The Puritan fight against ceremonialism, which is foundational in the development of the RPW, should be understood within this definition and not the modern usage of the term.

The problem of ceremonialism included a number of individual issues, but vestments¹⁹ became one of its major irritants. “The system [of vestments] was calculated not only to lend color and dignity to the services of the church but to provide a visual demonstration of the Catholic doctrine that the clergy were a peculiar people, a class set apart from ordinary men.”²⁰

However, even among the reformers there was disagreement on the degree of offense caused by vestments. “Following the principle that all things might be tolerated which were not condemned by Scripture, Luther and his followers retained most of the traditional clerical costume, along with many other ecclesiastical ceremonies.”²¹ Others were “prepared to tolerate these ceremonies and dresses and so on as long as they were explained to the people.”²² However, many others would settle for nothing less than worship patterned in its every detail after scripture.

All but the most rigid reformers allowed for some forms of ceremony (e.g., Baptist and the Lord’s Supper). However, among the more zealous “those [ceremonies] not having express command of God’ were to be removed altogether. . . .”²³ This is RPW in its infancy.

In 1546 the sentiment of government softened, then changed, to allow greater leniency toward the reformers. Soon many reform-minded English exiles living on the continent returned to England. A number of prominent continental reformers came to England as well.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Knappen (p. 82-83) describes at some length a number of the vestments used in the Roman Catholic Church and briefly explains some history behind them.

²⁰ Ibid., 83.

²¹ Ibid., 83-84.

²² Lloyd-Jones, 242.

The Incident of John Hooper

One English exile that used this occasion to make his way home was John Hooper. He returned to London from Zurich in 1549. Once back Hooper was well accepted, and the following year was offered a position as bishop. Hooper was willing enough to accept the position, but refused to wear its customary vestments. The Privy Council agreed to waive this requirement, but Archbishop Cramer and Nicholas Ridley, bishop of London, contested this leniency. Arguments between Hooper and Ridley ensued, but “rationalizations adopted by both sides were a sufficiently sorry lot. . . . At those games Hooper made a real effort, but still came off a decidedly second best.”²⁴

Hooper, being thus bested by Ridley, was ordered by Council to “keep his house” – presumably house arrest – and to refrain from preaching.²⁵ (Surprisingly, among the reformers only Bullinger and à Lasco stood by Hooper during this time.) Hooper immediately responded by publishing a confession of faith to refute unfounded charges of his being anabaptistic. Council considered this an infraction against their orders to not preach and Hooper was imprisoned in January 1551.

Within three weeks on his imprisonment Hooper recanted. Within another month he had been duly ordained as bishop – in full regalia. In holding this new position he was required to preach in standard vestments, although he might disregard the vestments at other times.²⁶

In fairness it should be noted that, although Hooper recanted of his convictions at this time, when he was later sentenced (1555) for his protestant ideas during Queen Mary’s rule, he refused to recant and “steadfastly endured the agonies of a lingering death.”²⁷

²³ Knappen, 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 87.

²⁵ Ibid., 88.

With the events of Hooper's incident thus outlined, attention must now be given to his original argument against the vestments. This classic defense is especially noteworthy because in it one can see the further maturation of thought which would eventually be entitled the Regulative Principle of Worship. Hooper's argument can be outlined as follows:

Major Premise – All things to be required in the Christian church are either ordained in the Bible or are thing indifferent.²⁸

Minor Premise – Vestments are neither ordained in the Bible for use in the Christian church nor are they things indifferent. Note:

1. Things indifferent are to be grounded on Scripture.²⁹
2. Or if not in Scripture they are things to be left free to be done or not done as each individual's conscience may direct, provided they are not in conflict with the Christian Faith.³⁰
3. They must have a manifest and open utility known in the church;
4. Things indifferent would be instituted in the church with lenity and without tyranny. Things indifferent degenerated or abused are no more indifferent.³¹

Conclusion – Therefore they are not to be required in the Christian church.³²

Lloyd-Jones makes an interesting summary on the situation: The Anglicans held that “[t]hese indifferent matters are unimportant, and as long as the gospel is being preached, and the church is being preserved, all should be satisfied.” The Puritans, who found the concept of enforcing an indifferent matter self-contradictory, responded with, “If you say that they are indifferent, why do you compel us to submit to them? Why must we conform to these things?”³³

²⁶ Ibid., 89.

²⁷ Ibid., 109.

²⁸ Hooper noted that “indifferent” means the use be not profitable or the non-use be not harmful. (Lloyd-Jones, 243.)

²⁹ Murray explains this point: “Hooper’s argument is apparently that although things indifferent . . . do not have express scriptural warrant, they nevertheless need to be in accord with Scripture in the sense that Scripture lays down general directions governing the use of things indifferent in such chapters as Romans 14, and therefore such things can only be used in faith if they are consistent with the teaching of such passages.” Iain Murray, *The Reformation of the Church* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 53.

³⁰ Murray (p. 54) notes, “Hooper’s second rule is that if a *necessary inference* can be justly made from Scripture, then such an inference has the same force as an explicit command or prohibition, and therefore vestments are not ‘indifferent’, because their use is contrary to what may be inferred from scriptural teaching.”

³¹ On these last two principles, Murray (p. 54) writes, “[I]ndifferent things must be seen to have a usefulness in the Church before they are practised [sic], and that if their practice is made obligatory and enforced by compulsion, then they cease to be ‘indifferent.’”

³² Lloyd-Jones, 243. Murray (p. 53) notes that the only available copy of this document is at least a second-generation copy and its imperfections may explain the “obscurity of Hooper’s language,” at least at some points.

³³ Ibid., 244.

Lloyd-Jones later accentuates his point: “But above all, the Puritans objected to the enforcing of these things.”³⁴

During the Reign of Edward VI

Young Edward’s six years of reign introduced the Forty-Two Articles (1553). Gibson holds that these Articles were intended to be temporary,³⁵ i.e., they “were never meant to form a complete system of theology, but were merely intended to treat of such points as were actually in dispute at the time,” by foes both in Catholic and Anabaptist form.³⁶ This intentional temporaryness, the king’s death within just months of its issuance and Bloody Mary following him to the throne – all this combined meant that the Forty-Two Articles had little impact in its time.

During the Reign of Elizabeth

Persecution was the order of the day for the reformers under the reign of Mary Tudor. As such, little was seen in the tug-of-war between the Puritans and their opponents, and thus little development was made in the RPW during those five years.

However, the same was not the case during Elizabeth’s reign. Not that the new monarch was a friend to the Puritans, for she was “a huge boulder in the path of Puritanism, unavoidable, insurmountable, immovable.”³⁷ But following in the footsteps of her father, Henry VIII, she did deal favorably with religious matters when she found sufficient political incentive for doing so.

Space constraints will not allow detailing all the circumstances that impacted the RPW during this period. However, a few items from both the Puritans and their opponents merit mentioning.

³⁴ Ibid., 250.

³⁵ Gibson, 25.

³⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

³⁷ Knappen, 168.

The Thirty-Nine Articles

Just a decade after the issuance of the Forty-Two Articles its more Calvinistic successor was released. But unlike its predecessor, the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) was wrought with no intentions of it being temporary. Minor changes were introduced eight years later to make sections pertaining to church government non-binding on the reformers, but otherwise “[s]ince 1571 no change whatever has been made in the text of the Thirty-Nine Articles.”³⁸ Also, it claimed the distinction of being the first set of Articles to which the clergy were required to subscribe.³⁹

The Admonition to the Parliament

Strife between the Puritans and Queen Elizabeth escalated. Puritan make efforts for reform through Parliament – most notably in 1565, 1571 and 1572 – but the Queen blocked these moves. One of the 1572 attempted changes came in the form of the anonymously written *Admonition to the Parliament*. This document was distributed not only to the House of Commons, but to the general population as well. This was . . .

. . . the first clear written statement of the Puritan objections to the Church of England settlement established by Elizabeth I. It marks a definite step towards the organization of the Puritan movement. . . . It is an attempt to indicate how the Reformed principle of the authority of Scripture may be applied more consistently to the worship, discipline and order of the English Church.⁴⁰

Having such a focus on worship which is based upon the authority of scripture, this is no doubt a part of the lineage of the RPW.

Although the *Admonition* was written and distributed anonymously, the authorities soon arrested two ministers, Thomas Wilcox and John Field, who confessed to be the authors. The

³⁸ Gibson, 47.

³⁹ Ibid., 43.

two were sentenced to a year of imprisonment. However, the authorities were not content to let the *Admonition* go unanswered, and assigned John Whitgift the task of making a public response. To Whitgift's *Answer to the Admonition* Thomas Cartwright issued his *Reply to the Answer*. Whitgift responded with *Defence [sic] of the Answer*, which in turn prompted *Second Reply* from Cartwright.⁴¹ An additional response will also be noted below as this flow of events merges with yet another.

Disciplina

A need arose among the Puritans for “a formal discipline, a constitution set down in black and white.”⁴² This task fell the lot of Walter Travers. By the mid- to late-1580's copies of this short work, entitled *Disciplina*, were at least in limited circulation. The turn of events is unclear, but it appears that it was over this writing and possibly similar matters that Travers found an opponent in his own brother-in-law,⁴³ Richard Hooker. Lloyd-Jones observes that,

The essential difference between the Puritan and the Anglican seems to be crystallized and put before us graphically in two men – Walter Travers and Richard Hooker. . . . [I]t was in Hooker, and with Hooker, and by Hooker that Anglicanism received clear definition. His ‘Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity’ created the ultimate pattern for Anglicanism. On the other hand, Walter Travers espoused the Presbyterian [Puritan] standpoint.”⁴⁴

These two men found regular occasions for their theological “jousting,” for “Walter Travers . . . [was] a colleague of the famous Richard Hooker in the Temple Church, Hooker in the morning saying one thing, Travers saying the exact opposite in the afternoon.”⁴⁵ But going beyond the men to the principles underlying their arguments, Bremer notes an issue that is pivotal to RPW:

⁴⁰ Murray, 83.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Knappen, 285.

⁴³ Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 441.

Whereas the Puritans were following Calvin in emphasizing man's depravity and the necessity of carefully following the path laid out by God, Hooker argued that reason was a gift of God, the creative use of which was as important a source of guidance as revelation. In thus arguing that 'the light of natural understanding, wit, and reason, is from God' he set forth a more rationalistic view of man and argued for a larger scope for human choice than the Puritans were willing to accept. In Hooker's works, most church ceremonies were described as matters where God allowed man to choose whatever form he willed, in contrast to the dissenters' argument that the order of worship was dictated by God in the Scriptures."⁴⁶

Hooker's stance was not prompted by Travers alone. "Another work evoked by this controversy [i.e., with Wilcox's and Field's *Admonition*] was Richard Hooker's famous and monumental *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, a classic defence [sic] of the religious principles embodied in the Elizabethan settlement."⁴⁷ Unlike much of the written bantering between the Puritans and Anglicans, Hooker's work was a "scholarly, and persuasive defense of the established church order,"⁴⁸ written in "sweet reasonableness."⁴⁹

Knappen notes that "[t]he only reply to Hooker was *Christian Letter of Certain English Protestants* published in 1599 . . .,"⁵⁰ but this rebuffing by the Puritans was weak at best. Collinson sums up the situation: "The fact that there was no weighty retort from the other side does not indicate, as some have suggested, that the puritans acknowledged defeat."⁵¹

Conclusion

Within this limited expose, one must wonder if the Puritans were beaten at this latest point by arguments of eloquence – even if those arguments were somewhat short on Biblical soundness. Whatever for adequate reasons or not, like Collinson, Knappen holds that the

⁴⁴ Lloyd-Jones, 253-54.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁴⁶ Bremer, 14-15, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Murray, 83.

⁴⁸ Bremer, 14.

⁴⁹ Knappen, 301.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Collinson, 430-31.

Puritans were bested by Hooker. “To all these works the Puritans could only make a half-hearted response. . . . So the last word in the battle . . . went to the Anglicans. . . . The Puritan’s guns were silenced. . . .”⁵²

However, even if these assessments are correct and the Puritans lost the battle to the Anglicans at that time, one must acknowledge that their impact was far from defeated. Even four centuries later many still march under that same banner which was once painstakingly stitched by the noble efforts of the sixteenth century Puritans – a banner now proudly bearing the name Regulative Principle of Worship.

⁵² Knappen, 301.

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