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GOSPEL-CENTERED WORSHIP AND THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

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INTRODUCTION

Because of a misspelled name on my electronic ticket, I was spending an unknown number of extra days in Ghana, West Africa, following a two-week mission trip in 2003. I had been there with four others on Covenant Theological Seminary's January mission trip leading a workshop on worship for pastors and worship leaders in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana, West Africa (now known as the Global Evangelical Church). It was my third visit to Ghana and my second time leading worship workshops there. I spent what ended up being four extra days in the home of pastor Seth Gbewonyo, enjoying warm hospitality and gaining deeper insight into family and church life for Presbyterians in Ghana. Seth had been a student at Covenant Theological Seminary and had taken the class I teach on Christian worship. Because of my delay, Seth and I were able to continue our ongoing discussion of the kind of worship that is pleasing to God and what that might look like in Ghana as compared to the United States.

My trips to Ghana stretched and challenged my understanding of what is known as the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW). I grew up in a family of

German ethnicity and Scottish Presbyterian ecclesiology and worship. My father was an ordained pastor in the former United Presbyterian Church of North America, which had its roots in the Scottish Presbyterian history of worship practice based on a strict adherence to the RPW. For seven years after seminary, I also served as a chaplain and Bible instructor at Geneva College in Pennsylvania, where that same Scottish Presbyterian tradition continues to the present day in the practice of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America of singing only the psalms without instrumental accompaniment in corporate public worship. The RPW is based on the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith 21.1, which states that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.”¹ Yet the confession also states in 1.6 that “we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word; and that 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.”² As I reflected on the very different contexts of Presbyterian worship in my Scottish Presbyterian heritage and in Ghana, West Africa, I found myself wondering how these two sections of the Confession fit together. This was especially intriguing to me because the primary influence on the development of the ecclesiology and worship of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ghana came from the Scottish Presbyterian missionaries who helped establish the church.

During my two mission trips to Ghana, I had the opportunity to worship in ten churches and to attend a four-day prayer gathering. Some of the features of Presbyterian worship in Ghana were different than those from my own background and experience as a Presbyterian in the United States. The Presbyterian churches in Ghana make use of a common lectionary in which each week’s Scripture readings from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Epistles are the same throughout the denomination. This, along with the weekly praying

¹ *The Westminster Standards* (Suwanee, Ga.: Great Commission Publications, 2005), 22.

² *Ibid.*, 4-5.

of the Lord's Prayer and professing of the Apostles' Creed, reflects a more ordered and fixed liturgy than some North American Presbyterian churches. Other expressions of the biblical elements of worship were more indigenously African. All of the churches gave a prominent place to the use of drums and other percussion instruments, including one church that used only percussion instruments for the accompaniment of congregational singing. The polyphonic rhythms, together with the vocal harmonies, were expressions of a musical language rooted in the Ghanaian culture.

During times of congregational prayer, the people worshiping together would pray out loud all at once. In one church of approximately five hundred people, the pastor asked the members of the congregation to stretch out their hands toward the brothers and sisters from the United States and ask for the Lord's blessings and traveling mercies for us. So, five hundred people stretched their hands toward us and prayed aloud simultaneously in a very moving expression of corporate prayer. During the receiving of the offering, the members of the congregation sang songs of joy while moving rhythmically down the aisles to present their offerings to God. In another congregation, approximately 1500 people sang and danced joyfully to the front with their offerings, giving obvious expression to their cheerfulness of heart. This was all done in a very orderly way that took less than five minutes. At some point in each of the services, usually during the congregational songs of praise, many of the people danced down to the front—first the men, then later the women. At one church, the people sang a song praising God for his saving grace and asking him to bless their children with the same gracious gift of salvation. This story-song celebrating God's covenantal blessing was then acted out: the men and women formed a circle and danced in front of the worship area, into which the children were invited, as the people cried out to God to pass on his blessing to their children.

How do these African Presbyterian expressions of worship fit into a proper understanding of the Regulative Principle of Worship? To what level of detail should we expect the RPW to shape a worship service? Is the RPW tied to a particular historical expression, or is it applicable across time and geography? How should the RPW be applied as the Gospel goes out geographically to the nations and across time to future generations? Is the goal in worship to be faithful to the RPW, or is the RPW a God-given tool for achieving the greater gospel purposes of corporate public worship?

THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE OF LIFE

A biblical understanding of the RPW is rooted in the nature of God. He has all authority as the sovereign omnipotent ruler of the universe. He is the One who reveals what he wants his creatures to know and how he wants them to live. He made people in his image for fellowship with himself and established the parameters of that fellowship. A desire to know and follow what God has revealed concerning how we are to live life before him is the proper posture of creatures. In every area of life, we are to live for God's glory; this includes corporate public worship.

God speaks with authority and clarity in his inspired, infallible, and inerrant word. He is the One who makes known what pleases him in all areas of life. This could be called the "regulative principle of life." God's will for such matters as marriage (Eph. 5), ruling over and caring for the creation (Gen. 1-2), the role of governing authorities (Rom. 13), and the utilization of spiritual gifts in the church (1 Cor. 12-14) – to name a few – is communicated in the Bible. God gives specific commands, examples, and principles that apply to various areas of life in his creation and kingdom. In some areas, he may give more specific instruction than in others. That is his prerogative as the Sovereign One. All of life is to be lived before the face of God and offered up as a living sacrifice to him (Rom. 12:1-2). This life outside of corporate public worship could be called "all of life as worship."

All of life as worship and corporate public worship on the Lord's Day are sometimes put at odds with one another as though one must be chosen over the other. The Bible does not confirm this attitude, but rather presents more of a fluid motion throughout the seven-day week. One day in seven is set apart for corporate public worship, where God's appointed means of grace converge to strengthen and equip God's people for the other six days that are to be lived to the glory of God in families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and in every area of life as wide as God's creation. The worshipful living of those six days then overflows into corporate public worship on the Lord's Day as God's people gather to celebrate the triumphs of His grace, confess their shortcomings and sin, and be renewed in covenant fellowship with God.

**GOD'S REGULATING OF WORSHIP:
DOING WORSHIP THE WAY GOD WANTS**

When we consider corporate public worship, therefore, it is vital that we study God's Word to discover what is pleasing to him when we gather on the Lord's Day. As we approach the Bible to find instruction on corporate public worship, we must bring a proper biblical hermeneutic to the search. Obviously, we do not treat the Bible as if it were a dictionary and turn to the letter "W" to read all we need to know about worship. The Bible is an organic, progressive, unfolding, dramatic story of God creating and then redeeming a people who have intimate fellowship with him and with one another. While the offering of sacrificial animals was at one time the right way for God's people to approach him in worship, Christians agree that, at this point in the story – that is, after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was the perfect sacrifice – this is no longer the case. We must remember our place in the overall story and worship God accordingly.

Once Adam and Eve fell into rebellion and sin and were driven from the garden of Eden, sinful people could only approach a holy God through an atoning sacrifice that made provision for the forgiveness of sin by this same gracious God. This principle is at the heart of what we often call gospel-centered worship – that is, worship that gives central place to the good news that, through God's gracious provision of an atoning sacrifice, sinners are forgiven and restored to fellowship with the true and living God. Jesus makes clear to his disciples (Luke 24) that Moses, the Psalms, and the Prophets all spoke concerning himself. God's regulating of corporate public worship is for the purpose of gospel-centered worship fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament sacrificial system under Moses, God gave detailed instructions and requirements concerning the way sinful worshipers were to approach him in his holiness. These instructions are the core of gospel-centered worship. They involve specific descriptions in Exodus and Leviticus of the place and arrangements of worship in the tabernacle, the people offering the sacrifices through the priesthood, and the kinds and varieties of sacrifices and the ways in which they were offered. Nothing was to be added or subtracted from God's regulating of worship without the potential of severe consequences, as seen in the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-3 when they offered "strange fire" containing unauthorized incense. The three main sacrifices included the sin

offering for the removal of guilt, the burnt offering for the consecration of the whole of life to God, and the peace offering for restoring fellowship with God. All of these, together with Passover, find their fulfillment in the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross and are therefore serving gospel purposes in the Old Testament. It is interesting to note that we do not find the same level of detail with regard to other aspects of Old Testament worship – such as prayer, singing, and instruction in the Word – as we find for the sacrificial system.³

As we turn to the New Testament, we see the detailed regulation of the sacrificial system under Moses now applied to a right understanding and preaching of the full biblical doctrine of the person and work of Christ. The apostle Paul in Galatians 1:6–9 states that, if anyone preaches another gospel than the one he has preached, that person is to be eternally condemned. The apostle John states that, if anyone denies that Jesus is the Christ, that person is of the antichrist (1 John 2:22); John later indicates that, if anyone does not acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, then that person, too, is of the antichrist (1 John 4:3). The most impassioned concern about detail in both the Old and New Testaments seems to relate to the person and work of Christ as either foreshadowed in the sacrificial system or fulfilled in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. In other words, the strict regulation of worship and the insistence upon correct doctrine in worship is for the purpose of serving the centrality of the gospel. The other elements of worship – including prayer, song, and teaching and preaching – have greater freedom of expression and are less regulated so long as they faithfully present the gospel as centered in the person and work of Christ.

In the New Covenant, Christ is presented as the perfect sacrifice and Passover lamb (Heb. 10:10–14; 1 Cor. 5:7); the new tabernacle and temple (John 1:14, 2:18–22); the great high priest (Heb. 4:14–16); and the one who opens the way and leads his people into the New Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22–24). Christ's sacrificial death and work as mediator restore fellowship with God and true worship of him. The teaching of Jesus himself in John 4:19–26 reveals the heart of worship that pleases God. In a discussion of the proper place of worship, Jesus communicates to the Samaritan woman that the Father is seeking true worshipers – those who will worship him in spirit and in truth. Worshipers in

³ John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth: A Refreshing Study of the Principles and Practice of Biblical Worship* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R Publishing, 1996), 22–23.

spirit are those who worship from the depths of their hearts, with all of their affections completely set upon God. Worshipers in truth are those who follow all that God has revealed about how he desires to be worshiped.

Who worships this way? Only the God-man Jesus Christ worships the Father fully in spirit and in truth. True worship is, therefore, about the Gospel of Christ. The question of *where* one is to worship is no longer relevant. Even the question of *how* one is to worship is secondary. The primary question in worship is *through whom*? Only those who are joined to Christ by grace through faith can worship in spirit and truth and be the kind of worshipers whom the Father is seeking. Once again, true worship is about the Gospel of Christ; all of the details concerning how we worship are to serve the overarching and primary goal of worship—a holy God coming near to his sinful people with the all-sufficient grace of his Son’s redemptive work to restore those people into intimate fellowship with himself as true worshipers.

The RPW, then, serves the gospel purposes of corporate public worship by keeping the focus on the proper understanding of and biblical instruction regarding the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ, and by revealing the absolute necessity of our union with him by grace through faith in order to worship God in the way that he desires. Additionally, the RPW serves the Gospel by revealing that God also regulates worship in his insistence that his Son be intimately and personally connected to every aspect of a corporate public worship service. Hebrews 2:10-12 makes clear that Jesus Christ is the one who stands in the midst of the worshipping congregation declaring God’s name and singing God’s praise. As the uniquely qualified and now ascended God-man, Jesus is to be at the center of every element in every worship service in every local church where God, in a glorious dialogue, meets his redeemed and adopted children, of whom he is not ashamed. It is Jesus who declares everything in the service that comes from God and is spoken to his people. That includes the call to worship, the declaration of forgiveness, the reading of the Word, the preaching of the Word, the invitation to the Lord’s Table, and the benediction of blessing on the people. Jesus also connects himself to everything that the congregation does in response to the glorious declaration of the Gospel in worship. He stands in the midst of the worshipping congregation and sings the Father’s praises, leads the people in prayer, sits with them at the table of the Lord, gives testimony to the grace of God in his people, and, as the One who became sin for us, he is even able to lead the corporate confession of sin. Christ-centered worship, then, is essentially

about: 1) the correct expression of doctrinal truth regarding the person and work of Christ, and 2) true worshipers being in vital union with Christ. Undergirding both of these, however, and giving power to the proceedings, is the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ himself is present in worship through the Holy Spirit declaring God's name and singing God's praise!

Gospel-centered worship at its best is saturated with the biblical doctrine of Christ our sacrifice and priest, our vital union with him by grace through faith, and his personal presence in every aspect and element of the worship service in each local church. This Christ-centered, gospel-centered focus is foundational to worship that is pleasing to God. Only once we understand this are we then able to begin the discussion of how the RPW relates to the actual structure and elements of a service of corporate public worship. All too often, we want to apply the RPW immediately to the elements, style, and arrangement of the service before considering the Christ-centered and gospel-centered nature of what God requires and regulates in worship. The structure, style, and arrangement of the elements he commands are to serve the Christ-centered and gospel-centered goal of corporate public worship. This is the heart of worship that pleases him.

With that foundation established, we can now discuss what God desires with regard to the specifics of a worship service. While most everyone agrees that the Bible does not give us an inspired account that reveals the detailed structure of a worship service for all times and all places, some have argued that the Mosaic sacrificial system itself serves as such a structure for New Covenant worship services.⁴ While rightly emphasizing that the three main sacrifices of the Old Covenant have ongoing relevance to gospel-centered worship, using the details of these sacrifices as the precise pattern for New Covenant worship seems to be an overextension of their primary purpose, which is to point to the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ. And while there is a kind of "gospel flow" in moving from the cleansing of the sin offering to the consecration of the burnt offering to the communion of the peace offering, there is also a distinctly New Covenant freedom in the expression of the various elements of worship presented in the New Testament.

⁴ Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003), 85.

The best approach to planning worship services that make proper use of the RPW is to discover the commanded elements for New Covenant worship and then structure them in such a way that they serve the Gospel by: 1) being centered in the sacrificial work of Christ, who brings sinners into fellowship with a holy God; 2) nurturing the faith of the worshipers, who are in vital union with Christ; and 3) facilitating the present work of the ascended Christ, who personally meets with his people as he declares God's glorious name and sings praise to God. What, then, are the commanded elements for New Covenant worship?

While there is no comprehensive list found in the New Testament, there are places where the foundational elements are given by direct biblical command, through apostolic example, or derived from biblical principles. The commands to pray (1 Tim. 2:1); to read and preach the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:2); to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19); and the celebration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26) seem quite clear and obvious as the foundational commanded elements of New Covenant worship. In a simple yet profound way, the synagogue elements of prayer, Scripture reading and explanation, and song, coupled with the temple focus on sacrifice and covenant renewal, are combined in New Covenant church worship through prayer, Scripture reading and explanation, song, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. What was anticipated in the Old Covenant is now fulfilled in the gospel-centered, Christ-centered worship of the New Covenant. Through apostolic example, we add the element of the offering (1 Cor. 16:2). Additionally, through biblical principle, we might also include professions of faith (such as the Apostles' Creed), oaths and vows (such as baptismal vows), and personal testimonies, all of which serve as windows into the lives of people being transformed by the grace of the Gospel of Christ.

What overarching principle does God desire us to follow as we use these commanded elements in the structuring, arranging, and planning of a worship service on any given Lord's Day? Once again, the guiding light is the Christ-centered, gospel-centered goal of corporate worship. This can be expressed through the concept of a gospel "storyline," in which the inherent drama of the Gospel unfolds throughout the movement and flow of the service, from the call to worship through the benediction. In worship, we are invited into God's holy presence as adopted sons and daughters of whom he is not ashamed because of Christ's work on our behalf. We come adoring and praising him for his

goodness, greatness, and grace. We come confessing our sins and looking to him for forgiveness and strength. We come making requests on behalf of ourselves and others in prayer. We praise and admonish and pray through song. We rejoice in the work of God's grace in one another as we hear the gospel story expressed through the lives of fellow believers. We profess enthusiastically together what we believe. We listen to God's Word read, proclaimed, and applied. We offer our lives and our substance to him. We baptize new converts and children of believers as he adds to our number. We gather in table fellowship remembering what Christ has done in his atoning, sacrificial death in our place. We receive his good word in the benediction as he sends us forth to live as salt and light for his glory in every area of life. We are captured and transformed into greater Christ-likeness by the gospel drama represented in a carefully planned worship service that proclaims that gospel story afresh each week.

Each local church's worship service has a unique gospel storyline for a particular Lord's Day as songs, prayers, Scripture readings, sermons, testimonies, and other elements are selected and arranged. Worship planners should be able to show and explain how each aspect of the service serves the unique gospel story of that service. It is also important to root the storyline of each church service in the gospel storyline of the Bible. Our worship services must be faithful to the story of God's Word. Additionally, it is a mark of a well-crafted service of worship to build bridges from the biblical storyline through the specific worship service into the gospel storyline that God is writing in the life of every believer. The dramatic movement of worship does not simply go from the call to worship to the benediction of a particular worship service. Rather, the flow is from God's unfolding drama in the Bible into the everyday lives of the gathered worshipers with an eye toward the eternal city where the story finds its ultimate fulfillment. The biblical-theological flow of Scripture roots our weekly worship services in the redemptive work of God in the historical past, as well as in the anticipated and promised eschatological work of the future—a work which is already present in some sense even now as the Holy Spirit brings both past and future together in the present gathering of God's people in local church worship services. This is the kind of worship God desires. Any discussion of the RPW that separates the detailed particulars of a worship service from this dynamic gospel drama is incomplete and shortsighted.

A SUGGESTED FIVE-FOLD APPROACH TO THE RPW

As I have thought about and studied these topics in detail over the past ten years, I have been developing the following five-fold approach to understanding and applying the RPW. It is still a work in progress, but does, I believe, provide a useful starting point for thinking about and planning corporate public worship services.

1. Commanded Elements

Worship should be pleasing to God and according to his regulations; therefore, we must make use of the biblically commanded elements of worship. These are the basic building blocks of corporate public worship, and, as discussed above, include prayer; reading and preaching of Scripture; singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; offerings; professions of faith; oaths and vows; and testimonies of God's grace.

2. Biblical Content

The commanded elements must be filled with content that is faithful to biblically revealed truth. A commanded element is not pleasing to God and according to his regulations if it lacks true biblical content. We must not only use the elements God requires, but we must also fill them with his revealed truth.

3. Gospel Shape

Biblically commanded elements filled with biblically faithful content must also be arranged in a gospel-centered fashion. Commanded elements that are not arranged in a way that serves the gospel storyline of the particular worship service can be confusing and incomplete. To simply "plug in" new content to the various "slots" in the program (such as hymns, responsive readings, unison prayers, and creeds) without giving them any gospel-shaped flow does not serve the overall goal of worship that is gospel-centered and Christ-centered.

4. Variety of Valid Expressions

These commanded elements filled with biblical content and arranged with gospel shaping can be expressed a variety of valid ways. Pre-written or spontaneous prayers are both valid expressions of prayer. The singing of the Lord's Prayer, the unison praying of the Lord's Prayer, or the structuring of directed prayers around the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer are all valid expressions of the Lord's Prayer. Psalms read in unison, responsively, or sung are all proper expressions of the psalms in corporate public worship. The singing of historic hymns filled with biblical content can be properly done with musical tunes centuries old or with tunes written in the past month. They can be sung without musical instrumentation or with a combination of winds, strings, and percussive instruments. One sermon could be preached in a one-hour service or three sermons could be preached in a three-hour service. The Lord's Supper could be served to the congregation as they sit in rows or at tables, or it could be served as people come to the front of the worship area to receive it from the elders.

5. Unique Local Church Contexts

As the Gospel has gone out to the nations and from one generation to the next, the corporate worship of God's people has never been monolithic in style or practice. The reality is that each local church has a unique context in which biblical worship regulated by God is carried out. Each has a unique spoken language, characteristic styles of dress, particular places where people gather for corporate worship, distinct kinds of musical instrumentation and style, particular education levels, specific numbers of children present, characteristic body movements, and many other qualities that make every local church different from every other local church to a greater or lesser degree. While each of these unique contexts must use the commanded elements of worship—giving them biblical content and gospel shape—the unique historical and geographical place in which worship happens must also be taken into account in any evaluation of worship that is pleasing to God.

A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY CASE STUDY: GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

John Calvin's approach to worship in the sixteenth century provides a good case study of a Reformer who was passionate about facilitating corporate public worship according to the patterns God requires in his Word. Calvin insisted on using all of the commanded elements (including singing) with biblical content (mostly psalms) in ways that took gospel shape (gospel praise and regular celebration of the Lord's Supper), with his own variation on valid expressions (new tunes for versified psalms) in his own unique local church context (Geneva, Switzerland).

The Reformation arrived in Geneva by way of the cities of Berne and Zurich. The liturgy inherited from this process was without music. As part of their own program of reform in Geneva, Farel and Calvin co-authored the "Articles of 1537," in which they tried to institute psalm-singing:

It is a thing very expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers through which one may pray to God or sing his praise so that the hearts of all might be moved and incited to form like prayers and to render like praises and thanks to God with similar affection.⁵

The proposal was rejected, and, for a variety of reasons, Calvin was banished from Geneva in 1538.⁶ He went to Strasbourg and there came under the influence of Martin Bucer, whose view of the reformation of worship was much more balanced than that of Zwingli, which held considerable sway throughout Switzerland. Bucer advocated the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, as opposed to the more infrequent observances held by others, and placed an emphasis on the sharing of a meal rather than a mass of sacrifice, as practiced by Roman Catholics. He placed a communion table before the people and on their

⁵ "Articles Concernant L'Organization de l'eglise et du cultea Geneve, proposes au conseil par les ministres, le 16, Janvier 1537," in *Ionnis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guillaume Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Eduard ReussRoss (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke et Filium, 1863-1900), X.6. Quoted in Ross J. Miller, "Calvin's Understanding of Psalm-Singing as a Means of Grace," in *Calvin Studies VI: A Colloquium on Calvin Studies at Davidson College*, ed. John H. Leith (Davidson, N.C.: Davidson College, January 1992), 35-36. Hereafter referred to as Miller, "Calvin's Understanding of Psalm-Singing."

⁶ Miller, "Calvin's Understanding of Psalm-Singing," 35.

level, rather than having an altar elevated beyond the people.⁷ He also came to quite different conclusions on the use of music in public worship than those of Zwingli. At numerous points in the service of worship, there was congregational singing not only of psalms and hymns of praise, but also of the Ten Commandments.⁸ As a result of Bucer's influence, Calvin came to believe wholeheartedly that the reform of worship was central to the reform of the church and that, with the arrival of the Reformation and the gospel of grace, there was every reason to sing – and to sing enthusiastically.⁹

After three years in Strasbourg, Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 with his views on music in worship even more firmly established. Upon his return, he instituted psalm singing. The Geneva Psalter included metrical psalms, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Song of Simeon. As he developed the Psalter from 1542 to 1562, Calvin employed the services of Clement Marot, Theodore Beza, and Louis Bourgeois. These men were gifted in poetry and music and worked to versify the psalms into Western meter and put them to singable tunes.¹⁰ In doing this, Calvin was drawing on the greatness of past expressions of biblical worship – the Psalms – while looking for fresh expressions and applications of biblical worship that connected well with the contemporary culture of his day. The Hebrew meter of the psalms did not easily lend itself to Western meter that was singable. Therefore, Calvin had the words arranged in a way that reflected the essence of the psalms while also adapting them to music that could be sung by the congregation he served in Geneva. He urged his composers to capture the emotion of the psalms in their musical compositions. He also stood against the current of his time in Switzerland by insisting that congregational singing be a vital part of the worship of God's people. Many of the tunes used were of a very lively character.¹¹ His passion for the singing of the psalms is reflected in the following statement from Calvin as quoted by Ross Miller:

⁷ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976), 26.

⁸ Charles Garside, *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 69, part 4 (Philadelphia, Pa.: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), 11.

⁹ Lawrence C. Roff, *Let Us Sing* (Norcross, Ga.: Great Commission Publications, 1991), 47.

¹⁰ Miller, "Calvin's Understanding of Psalm-Singing," 35-36.

¹¹ Roff, *Let Us Sing*, 59.

The psalms could incite us to raise our hearts to God and to move us with such ardor that we exalt through praises the glory of his name And truly, we know through experience that song has great force and vigor to move and enflame hearts to invoke and to praise God with a more lively and ardent zeal.¹²

Calvin showed great creativity and innovation by using children to teach the new versification of the psalms to the worshiping congregation. Miller again quotes Calvin:

If some children, whom someone has practiced beforehand in some modest church song, sing in a loud and distinct voice, the people listening with complete attention and following in their hearts what is sung by mouth, little by little each one will become accustomed to sing with the others.¹³

Additionally, Calvin was not cold and stern in his approach to worship. William Maxwell gives insight into this aspect of his character as he quotes a biographer of Calvin named Doumergue:

Finally, after these acts of adoration, these prayers said kneeling, this quickening instruction, the worship culminates in the supreme ceremony of holy communion. Calvin has been very greatly misunderstood. For him the complete act of Christian worship is that at which the Lord's Supper is celebrated, and the complete Sunday morning office is that which includes the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Have men said that this worship, the true Calvinian cult, was in its nature poor and cold? Those who were present at it have told us that often they could not keep back tears of emotion and joy. Singings and prayers, adoration and edification, confession and forgiveness of sins, acts ritualistic and spontaneous—all the essential elements of worship were there; and what is not less important, they were combined into an organism that though very simple, was yet both supple and strong.¹⁴

Here we also see Calvin's desire to celebrate the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. He even included the singing of psalms during the celebration of the Lord's Supper itself.¹⁵ He designed his order of worship to be a unity of Word

¹² Miller, "Calvin's Understanding of Psalm-Singing," 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 2 vols. (Lausanne: Georges Bridel, 1902), 2:504. Quoted in William D. Maxwell, *Concerning Worship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 27.

¹⁵ Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, 72.

and Table.¹⁶ Though Calvin's position was never fully adopted in Geneva, he ordered his worship services to end with prayer and praise that set the stage for the Lord's Supper – even when it was not celebrated.¹⁷

To follow in the worship heritage of Calvin, we too must be willing to go where the Scripture directs us. We must have the same desire to be deeply rooted in historical expressions of biblical worship while finding creative and relevant ways to make that gospel-centered worship glorifying to God and edifying to his people in our time and place.

THE CONVERGENCE OF THE MEANS OF GRACE IN CORPORATE PUBLIC WORSHIP

God has established corporate public worship in the way that he has for the purpose of his own glory. He receives glory in the praise of his people for his goodness, greatness, and grace. He also receives glory as his people are transformed into greater Christ-likeness through the convergence of the means of grace, which he commands to be brought together and regulated in corporate public worship. Prayer, the reading and preaching of Scripture, and the administration of the sacraments, when combined in gospel-centered worship, have the power to form and transform the people of God and bring them into greater conformity with the likeness of his Son. God's glory and our edification are also greatly enhanced when the local congregation comes together in the fellowship of gospel-centered worship in a spirit of unity with one mouth and one heart (Rom. 15:5-6).

CONCLUSION

Let us now return full circle to my experiences in Ghana. How am I to respond to the manner of Scripture reading, praying, receiving offerings, and use of drums in that worship context? When the Presbyterians in Ghana brought their tithes and offerings forward while singing songs of joy and dancing with rhythmic body movements, were they using commanded elements filled with biblical content and given gospel shape in a valid expression consistent within

¹⁶ D.H. Hislop, *Our Heritage in Public Worship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1935), 188.

¹⁷ Maxwell, *Concerning Worship*, 26.

their own unique local church context? I am convinced that the answer to that question is a resounding yes! Does that mean that all Presbyterian churches – or even all Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) churches – must receive offerings in precisely the same manner? I am convinced that the answer to that is a resounding no!

In the PCA and other denominations, churches must consider the element of offering within the overall gospel storyline of the worship service in their unique local church context. The commanded element of offering is to be filled with the biblical content of joy as it takes gospel shape through various valid expressions in each local church. That might mean that the offering is placed after the sermon as a response to the indescribable gift of grace in God's Son, and it might be expressed through the singing of a congregational song of joy while remaining seated in the pew or chairs. But the offering might also look quite different than this in a different church with a different context.

As one who teaches classes on worship at Covenant Theological Seminary, I have a deep passion for gospel-centered worship that is served well by the RPW. I long to see our graduates have a vision for corporate public worship that includes an understanding of gospel-centered worship as presented in this essay – a vision that enables them to plan and lead services of corporate public worship with great wisdom, discernment, and skill. As the Gospel goes to the nations and to future generations, I pray that an appreciation for the depth and beauty of the Christ-centered and gospel-centered worship that God desires and regulates by his Word and Spirit will spread as well. In so doing, may it glorify God, edify his people, and draw many others to the joyful task of worshipping him in spirit and in truth.

