

John Owen on the regulative principle.

John Owen produced a robust, Christ-centered ecclesiology in which the regulative principle supports the Christian life the way joists support a floor. In Owen's theology, Christ shines like the sun while the expressions of the regulative principle are like rays warming and energizing the Church. In the voluminous writings of this master, I found six pieces particularly helpful. These are his *Christologia* (Vol.. 1), *Duties of Pastors and Duties of Laity* (Vol.. 13), *Discourse Concerning Liturgies* (Vol.. 15), *A Discourse Concerning Evangelical Love, Church Peace, and Unity* (Vol.. 15), *Worship of God and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament* (Vol.. 15), *Two Questions Concerning the Power of the Supreme Magistrate About Religion and the Worship of God* (Vol.. 13). I also found some helpful material in others of his writings. To these must be added the detailed exegetical study of Hebrews, from which Owen draws so many of his rich insights into the priestly work of Jesus Christ and its significance for the Christian life.

1. Argument from the glory due to Christ as divine builder of the Church.

This is developed in Owen's Christologia, Chapter 11, pp. 182 ff.

Christ built the church universal, whose foundation is himself. His materials are living stones that were dead. Christ made them alive. Christ sanctified the house with his own blood, so it would be a dwelling for God. Christ anointed the house with the Holy Spirit. We anticipate Christ's glorious entrance: his promise to dwell with us to the end. (From Owen's Commentary on Heb 3:3-6.)

"Glory is bestowed upon Christ by virtue of his doing the Father's will, being Mediator and accomplishing salvation. As to the nature of this glory, it consists in this, that he is the object of all divine religious worship, and the principal author of all the laws thereof whereby it is outwardly and solemnly celebrated or performed."

As we will see, for Owen this means all the doctrine of the church.

Ø Thus the church is to glorify Christ in two ways:

1. Believers serve him, trust him, believe in him, obey him "with all religious subjection of soul and conscience." John 14:1 "... you believe in God, believe also in Me."

2. Believers observe "all his commands, laws, and institutions, as the great sovereign Lord over our souls and consciences in all things." Romans 14:9 "For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living."

A. Central aspects of Owen's understanding of the regulative principle.

1. The regulative principle serves as a framework for the expression of the believer's faith. Without trust and faith in Christ, there can be no service or obedience to him.
2. Believers submit their souls and consciences, not merely their outward actions, to Christ.
3. The ground that compels the believer's submission to obedience is the lordship of Christ over the church, which is a lordship over the soul and conscience, not merely over actions.
4. We will see (below) that the motive for the believer's submission is love.

B. Assessment of the argument:

This is a compelling argument. Christ redeemed us, we are his. Because he is the Savior, we trust and believe in him. But then faith in him requires submission of soul and conscience because we are saved from sin and its consequences for the purpose of living in righteousness, which is defined by Christ's word. Christ also rules our souls and consciences by virtue of being the divine Lord, the head of the church.

“Christ is to be worshipped because he is God, but the great motive hereunto is what he hath done for us in the work of redemption.” (Owen draws a parallel between Ex 20:2, 3 and Rev 5:8-13).

2. The nature of the believer's obedience to Christ.**A. Willing submission of soul and conscience to Christ's word.**

Owen consistently defines obedience to Christ as a willing submission of soul and conscience to his revealed will. All men are under the authority of the moral law, but to those who are called to faith in the gospel, “the authority of Christ does immediately affect their minds and consciences.” (p. 183)

Obedience unto Christ does not consist merely in doing the things which he requireth. So far the church under the Old Testament was obliged to yield obedience unto Moses; and we are yet so unto the prophets and apostles. ... All obedience unto Christ proceeds from an express subjection of our souls and consciences unto him. (p. 184)

B. Especially in matters of divine worship.

This becomes especially necessary when we consider the institutions of divine worship, which for Owen, again, covers not only the assembly of the church but the government of the church and its life.

“The appointment of all divine ordinances under the New Testament was his [Christ's] especial province and work, as the Son and Lord over his own house; and obedience unto him in the observance of them is that which he gives in especial charge unto all his disciples, Matthew 28:18-20. And it is nothing but a loss of that subjection of soul and conscience unto him which is indispensably required of all believers, that has set the minds of so many at liberty to do and observe in divine worship what they please, without any regard unto his institutions.

Our consciences were bound by the moral law even before Christ. But in the case of the institutions of divine worship:

“our consciences can no way be affected with a sense of them, or a necessity of obedience in them, but by the sole and immediate authority of Christ himself. If a sense hereof be lost in our minds, we shall not abide in the observance of his commands” p. 186.

If we lose that sense of Christ's authority, we shall not be willing to submit our souls and consciences to him, and this will be especially apparent in the life and worship of the church.

C. True worship requires obedience to Christ from the conscience.

Discourse concerning liturgies, chapter 8, pp. 59-60

“The worship of God is of that nature that whatsoever is performed in it is an act of religious obedience. That anything may be esteemed such, it is necessary that the

conscience be in it subject to the immediate authority of God. His authority alone renders any act of obedience religious. ... In things which concern the worship of God, the commanding power is Christ, and his command the adequate rule and measure of our obedience. (Mt. 28:20).”

D. The regulative principle obliges the church to protect the freedom of conscience of the believer.

Works of John Owen Vol.. 15. A discourse concerning evangelical love, church peace, and unity, pp. 176-177. This point is also made in his defense of nonconformity to the Anglican Church.

Christ’s regulation of the church also entails that in matters which his word leaves open the consciences and souls of believers are free. The regulative principle obliges the church to respect the liberty of believers. Owen develops this especially as he examines the application of the regulative principle to the communion of the saints. A summary follows:

1. The rule of communion among the disciples of Christ in all his churches is invariably established and fixed by himself.
2. All the benefits and blessings, all the comfort and use of church assemblies and communion, depend alone on the promise of the presence of Christ with them. He will only be present in the ordinances he has commanded.
3. Now, that any one may thus enjoy the presence of Christ in any church, with the fruits and benefits of it, no more can be required of him but that, through the preaching of the gospel and baptism, being made a professed disciple, he do or be ready to do and observe all whatsoever Christ hath commanded.
4. In all other things which do relate unto the worship of God, he hath set them and left them at liberty, Galatians 5:1; which, so far as it is a grant and privilege purchased for them, they are obliged to make good and maintain.

Commenting on Romans 14-15 treating matters of dispute in the church, Owen points out:

“Where, indeed, the question was about the institutions of Christ, he [Paul] binds up the churches precisely unto what he had received from him, 1 Corinthians 11:23; but in cases of this nature, wherein a direct command of Christ cannot be pleaded nor is pretended, he absolutely rejects and condemns all thoughts of such a procedure. But supposing that differences in judgment and practice were and would be among Christians, the sum of his advice is, that all offenses and scandals ought to be diligently avoided...”

E. The motive of love for obedience to Christ.

Chapter 12 of the Christologia (The Especial Principle of Obedience to Christ.), p. 188.

Owen shows that love constitutes the believer’s motive for submitting soul and conscience to Christ’s rule, especially in the institutions of divine worship.

“That which does enliven and animate the obedience whereof we have discoursed, is love. This himself makes the foundation of all that is acceptable unto him. “If,” saith he, “ye love me, keep my commandments,” John 14:15. As he distinguisheth between love and obedience, so he asserts the former as the foundation of the latter. He accepts of no obedience unto his commands that does not proceed from love unto his person.”

Obedience without love is not evangelical obedience. Nowhere does Owen teach a regulative principle that could be construed as a rod to do the Master's will. Always it is Owen's grasp of the beauty and majesty of Christ, and the richness of the depth of God's mercy in Christ, that undergird his teaching of the regulative principle.

F. The motive of conformity to Christ for obedience to him

Chapter 15 of the Christologia (Conformity with Christ.), p 229.

Here Owen describes sanctification as the spring from which obedience to the will of Christ flows. The Holy Spirit, if not resisted, will lead believers to desire to be like Christ. Thus, they will mature in faithful obedience to Christ.

“It is, therefore, evident that the life of God in us consists in conformity unto Christ; nor is the Holy Spirit, as the principal and efficient cause of it, given unto us for any other end but to unite us unto him, and make us like him. Wherefore, the original gospel duty, which animates and rectifies all others, is a design for conformity unto Christ in all the gracious principles and qualifications of his holy soul, wherein the image of God in him does consist.”

Owen concludes his chapter on Conformity to Christ abruptly with an outline of the benefits to believers of conformity to Christ. (This parallels the benefits of union with Christ as outlined in the Westminster Catechisms.) He further briefly notes benefits that govern the daily life of believers in the world and says that if he could, he would treat these under three headings:

- ∅ Jesus Christ, as head of the church, emanates grace and power by which these blessings are communicated to believers..
- ∅ Believers live in Christ in the exercise of faith, from which follow two things:
 - (1st,) The necessity of universal evangelical obedience, seeing it is only in and by the duties of it that faith is, or can be, kept in a due exercise unto the ends mentioned.
 - (2nd,) That believers do hereby increase continually with the increase of God, and grow up into him who is the head, until they become the fullness of him who fills all in all.
- ∅ A conviction that a real interest in, and participation of, these things cannot be obtained any other way but by the actual exercise of faith on the person of Jesus Christ.

Owen cuts off his study here, saying: “And this argument cannot be handled as it does deserve, unto full satisfaction, without an entire discourse concerning the life of faith; which my present design will not admit of.”

In this short summary we see how Owen understands the regulative principle to be a support, a trellis for faith itself, and for the life of the Christian who is maturing and growing into Christ.

3. Two types of worship.

Owen discusses this most succinctly in his Worship of God and Discipline of the Churches of the New Testament, (in Vol. 15) which is a “short catechism” with “explanation.”

Owen distinguishes between “natural or moral” and “outward” worship. This distinction parallels the dichotomy between natural revelation and scriptural revelation. Natural worship is that called for by the 1st commandment. It is natural in the sense that as created beings all men by nature know to worship the Creator. This was Adam's worship before the fall, and even fallen men have the light of nature to lead them to the knowledge of this worship.

“That God is to be worshipped, and that according to his own will and appointment, is a principal branch of the law of our creation written in our hearts, the sense whereof is renewed in the second commandment...”

Owen continues:

“but the ways and means of that worship depend merely on God’s sovereign pleasure and institution. We know the way God is to be worshiped in and by the written word only, which contains a full and perfect revelation of the will of God as to his whole worship and all the concerns of it.”

This is what he calls “outward worship,” and which he says is what the Scripture commonly calls “the worship of God.”

A. God’s outward worship is commanded by him and accomplished in obedient faith.

Whatever we do in God’s worship, we must do it that he may be sanctified, or whatever we do is an abomination to him (Lev 10:3). In the regulation of worship Owen considers obedience and faith to be two aspects of the same disposition in the Christian. The main ways in which we sanctify the name of God in worship are:

Ø Reverence for the authority of God appointing his worship.

“When in every ordinance we consider his appointment of it, and submit our souls and consciences unto his authority therein; which if we observe any thing in his worship but what he hath appointed we cannot do. Not formality, not custom, not the precepts of men, not any thing but the authority and command of God, is to be respected in this obedience. This is the first thing that faith regards in divine worship; it rests not in any thing, closeth not with any thing, but what it discerns that God hath commanded, and therein it eyes his authority as he requireth it: Malachi 1:6, Romans 14:11.”

Ø The promise of God’s special presence in and with his instituted ordinances of old.

“In them [instituted ordinances] is the “tabernacle of God with men,” and he “dwells among them, and they are his people,” Revelation 21:3, Matthew 18:19, 20.” We are to treat these ordinances with the reverence due to the Lord himself.

Ø And as to the manner of their performance:

The way in which we worship is as important as what we do.

“(1.) The inward principle of our obedience, our faith and love are to be preserved from decay: Revelation 2:4, 5, Revelation 3:3.

(2.) The outward manner of observance is to be kept entire, according to the primitive institution of Christ: 1 Corinthians 11:23 — not admitting of any corruptions in it, to avoid the greatest trouble: Galatians 5:11.”

B. Brief summary of Owen’s view of the regulation of Christian worship.

The regulative principle governs faith, and faith seeks Christ’s regulation by which it will grow and strengthen by God’s will in fulfillment of his promises.

“Faith, therefore, directed by the word to rest in God, to receive the Lord Christ in the observation of his ordinances, is excited, increased, strengthened, and that in answer unto the appointment and promises of God.”

C. Conditions for true Christian worship.

Since Christ now reveals the outward forms of worship as the Mediator of the New Covenant, we must turn to his word to know how to please God. Owen identifies four conditions

for “a real evangelical institution of worship.” “And whatever is thus appointed, the church is indispensably to continue in the observation of, unto the end of the world.”

1. That it be a command of Christ by word or by example given for our imitation (Mt. 28:20).
2. That it be given and commanded to the whole church, with the limitation of its administration expressed in the word (1Cor 11:25).
3. That gospel grace be required in them that attend unto it if it is to be performed properly.
4. That it teach, or represent, or seal, or improve some grace of the covenant, and have a promise of acceptance annexed unto it.

D. The duty of the church in knowing Christ’s will governing worship.

It is the church’s duty to “search out all the commands of Christ recorded in the gospel, and to yield obedience unto them.” This duty extends to every member in the church and must not be limited to what we find in other churches. The church must go to the word of Christ.

Owen warns that:

“a principal part of the duty of the church in this matter is to take care that nothing be admitted or practiced in the worship of God ... which is not instituted and appointed by the Lord Christ. In its care, faithfulness, and watchfulness herein consists the principal part of its loyalty unto the Lord Jesus as the head, king, and lawgiver of his church...”

He adds this warning:

“the great apostasy of the church in the last days, foretold in the Scripture, and which God threateneth to punish and revenge, consists principally in false worship and a departure from the institutions of Christ. Revelation 13:4, 5, 17:1-5.”

4. The Principal Institutions of the Gospel which are to be Observed in the Worship of God.

Finally, I turn briefly to Owen’s understanding of what this worship of the gospel age encompasses. Below is Owen’s answer to his catechism question on this topic. From it we can see that, in Owen’s view, the regulative principle governs all of ecclesiology.

Ø Which are the principal institutions of the gospel to be observed in the worship of God?

Answer —

1. The calling, gathering, and settling of churches, with their officers, as the seat and subject of all other solemn instituted worship; Matthew 28:19, 20; Acts 2:41, 42; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11, 12; Matthew 18:17, 18; 1 Corinthians 4:17, 7:17; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 3:15.
2. prayer, with thanksgiving; 1 Timothy 2:1; Acts 6:4, 13:2,3.
3. singing of psalms; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16.
4. preaching the word; 2 Timothy 4:2; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 14:3; Acts 6:4; Hebrews 13:7.
5. administration of the sacraments of baptism and the supper of the Lord; Matthew 28:19, 26:26, 27; 1 Corinthians 11:23.
6. discipline and rule of the church collected and settled; most of which have also sundry particular duties relating unto them, and subservient unto their due observation. Matthew 18:17-19; Romans 12:6-8; Revelation 2, 3;

“The principal thing we are to aim at, in the whole worship of God, is the discharge of that duty which we owe to Jesus Christ, the king and head of the church: Hebrews 3:6, 1 Timothy 3:15. This we cannot do unless we consider his authority as the formal reason and cause of our observance of all that we do therein. If we perform any thing in the worship of God on any other account, it is no part of our obedience unto him, and so we can neither expect his grace to assist us, nor have we his promise to accept us therein; for that he hath annexed unto our doing and observing whatever he hath commanded, and that because he hath commanded us: Matthew 28:20. This promised presence respects only the observance of his commands.”

5. Sinclair B. Ferguson *John Owen on the Christian Life*.

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I conclude with two brief observations made in Ferguson’s summary of Owen, which I recommend for a general overview of Owen’s theology.

(*The Fellowship of the Saints*) p. 154. “Frequently, in this context, the regulative principle of the whole Christian life is applied to fellowship in the church: only what God has commanded in his word should be regarded as binding; in all else there may be liberty of action. Thus, while in soteriology, Owen defended the liberty of God in the sovereign exercise of his grace, in ecclesiology we find him contending for the liberty of the Christian man. This is essentially a liberty to obey God and the teaching of Scripture.”

p. 156 “Owen’s approach to the doctrine of the church is primarily theological. In keeping with his distinction between the covenant of works or life, and the covenant of grace, he regards the church-state as one which is founded in the light of nature. This is important in view of his defence of the regulative principle, that only what is commanded in Scripture, *or agreeable to the light of nature* is acceptable in worship. This latter concessive clause in the principle of purity of worship was necessary to any defence of it over against the Anglican view that whatever was not explicitly forbidden was permitted.” [CA what Owen understands by “agreeable to the light of nature,” includes such things: e.g., the magistrate may prevent public disturbances, stop idolatrous practices, stop seditious activities in churches. See above on natural and outward worship.]