A lot of what I’m going to say in my rambling comments is aimed at our younger ministers, because I fear that the people in my age-group—ten years younger and older than me—are in danger of being weighed down by the mono-cultural sensibilities and categories of Gen-X and older Millennial pop culture, and that we’re going to make the same mistake we were critical of our parents’ and grandparents’ generation—exalting a cultural standard we were comfortable with rather than a biblical standard that transcended our moment.

There is a great call in the evangelical community for reforming worship. There’s increasingly a concern—not just in global Christianity but in North American Christianity—that everything is moving toward a polarizition of charismatic and high-liturgical Christianity. This is underscored by recent studies of Gen Z men and women. Dr. Hester made reference to a recent article that quipped that the worship wars were now not so much between generations as between Gen Z husbands and wives.

There is an increasing consensus among evangelicals that affirm the sufficiency of Scripture that, somehow, we need to reform our worship, that evangelicals don’t have a theology of worship, and that relevance to popular culture has become the only value in worship, that popular culture is our theology of worship. Younger adult “nones” are disproportionately critical of the shallowness and cultural captivity of the evangelical church. And more and more churched younger adults, male and female alike, (but even more so male), are critical of what recent Barna and Fuller Youth Institute surveys have called “trendiness” in church.

There was more of a pop “monoculture” fifteen or twenty years ago that has been shattered by the internet, social media, and algorithms. So there’s an increasing feeling that it’s anybody’s guess what “cultural relevance” even means anymore. It’s impossible, anymore, to pin down “what the young people want” because we’re not in a monoculture. Instead, our suburban and even small town neighborhoods are filled with people who have competing tastes and visions of what’s “culturally relevant.”

Twenty years ago, the only questions I got in my worship class were about “How can we be more culturally relevant and still maintain the sufficiency of Scripture and the regulative principle of worship?” But in the last five to seven years, those questions are in the minority, most students (keep in mind that most of my students are ministerial students/majors) are critical of the shallowness and trendiness and “cheuginess” of the “Millennials and Gen-Xers”(“cheugy” is how Gen-Zers characterize outdated Millennial sensibilities). Now, I’m having to deal with questions like “How can we adopt historic Christian liturgical practices and still maintain the sufficiency of Scripture and the regulative principle?” So there’s a torrent of criticism coming against typical 1990s and early 2000s worship trendiness among low-church evangelicals and a call for reform.

We’ve already heard from the other panelists the importance of reforming worship so that our worship is driven by God’s self-revelation in Scripture--not our own devices, while we read that Scripture with the saints and martyrs of the Christian past. This is going to condition our efforts at reform: The older preachers were fond of saying that the “matter and manner” of our worship should be regulated by the Word of God. “Matter” roughly means what we would call content or substance, while “manner” roughly means what we would call form or style. In other words, both *what* we do in worship, and *how* we do it, should be regulated by Holy Scripture. The content of our worship (singing, preaching, everything we do in worship), should be drenched in the teachings of Holy Scripture. And we should make sure that everything we do in worship is done in a way that accords with--is regulated by--Scripture (interpreted covenantally, through the lens of New Testament revelation).

And we should make sure when we ask this question--is everything I’m doing in worship regulated by new covenant precept and example?--that we don’t do it legalistically, like checking off a box because I have a chapter and verse giving me the right to do something. Instead we should be asking, “What’s the ‘authorial intent’ of the New Testament?” In other words, we want to find out what the authors of the New Testament *intended* by what they said and modeled about worship: what did Jesus and the Apostles value in worship? And behind this, What did the Spirit who inspired new covenant Scripture value in worship? Another word for this is “apostilicity.” What is apostolic? We’ve got to try to get inside the apostles’ heads and see what motivated them, what their intent was.

That’s what the regulative principle is really all about. It’s not finding out-of-context chapter-and-verse references that justify what we want to do (e.g., I want to have liturgical dance; so I’m going to quote the verse about David dancing before the Lord). Instead, it’s about asking ourselves the “why” questions, like “Why is it that the apostles had everything Graeco-Roman urban multi-culture had to offer but their worship was still much more simple and synagogue-like, radically set apart from Graeco-Roman ‘pop’ culture—at the same time that the Graeco-Roman mystery religions were not?”

If we’re going to reform our worship according to Scripture, these are the kinds of deep “why” questions we’ve got to ask about the apostolic witness. If we’re going to reform our worship according to the Scriptures, we’ve got to wean ourselves off of what David F. Wells has called “*sola cultura*”—culture alone, where the culture of our moment is what sets the agenda for how we worship the transcedent God of the universe. We’ve got to get back to asking the holy apostles deep and profound questions about how to worship and why—about how they worshiped and why.

Now, having said this, I want to echo what Dr. Hester has said. There’s this retrieval instinct we’re seeing in lots of Gen-Z folks who are pendulum-swinging away from the shallowness and lack of transcendence of pop worship. And this is a good thing. We need to engage in renewal through retrieval. But more and more Baptist and low-church evangelical Gen-Zers are embracing Anglicanism and Lutheranism, or even Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. There’s a cottage industry of this stuff on YouTube. “Redeemed Zoomer,” the progressive Jewish Gen-Zer who was converted to conservative Protestant Christianity recently talked about this in a podcast with Michael Horton. There are hundreds of these podcasters and Youtubers with huge numbers of viewers who are promoting the idea that the only way to retrieve genuine Christianity is to embrace a high-liturgical form of worship and devotion.

(“High liturgical” is my shorthand for extreme ritualism in worship that relies heavily on images, ceremonies, extrabiblical liturgical forms, clerical attire, candles, incense, etc. I use “high” just because I don’t want to give people the idea that there’s something unbiblical—or for that matter un-Baptist or un-Reformed—about “liturgy.” Everybody has a liturgy, a form of worship, a pattern and order of worship, whether it’s written down or not. Baptists, including General/Free Will Baptists have always had diversity in worship, with some worshiping more formally and some worshipping less formally.)

This gets to my whole point: In wanting to reform our worship because we’re reacting against the shallowness and culture-boundness and lack of transcendence in much of our worship, we must renew through retrieving our tradition that is rooted and grounded in Holy Scripture and the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*—the doctrine that says the only practices we can impose on God’s people are those that are warranted by Holy Scripture. So we want to guard against pendulum-swinging to a non-*sola Scriptura*approach that just picks and chooses between different high-liturgical traditions because we know that will inoculate us against shallow or trivial pop-culture worship. Instead, we need to try to embody in our worship a sense of what the author of Hebrews refers to when he says, “Worship the Lord with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” And we need to look back at precedents in our own tradition, and the Reformed tradition it’s located within, and the early church fathers—traditions that have valued *sola Scriptura* and the ordinary means of grace and the sufficiency of Scripture while also valuing reverence and awe and depth and transcendence in worship.

Along these lines, I want to spend most of the rest of my time today talking to my younger brothers and sisters who are thinking about jumping ship both in our denomination and in the wider Baptist and Reformed orbit. I want to tell you that you don’t have to do that. Resist the temptation to get sucked into the vortex of the Anglican or Lutheran or Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox YouTube culture. That’s not any more sound and scriptural a strategy than getting sucked into the vortex of the charismatic and quasi-charismatic YouTube culture.

Some of you are tempted to jump ship because you don’t think there’s a place for you in the Baptist world. This growing impulse is why I started my Free Will Baptist History course last semester with the comment by the nineteenth century Protestant-turned-Catholic cardinal John Henry Newman: “To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant.” Don’t take this at face value, just because there are thirty times more Youtubers right now saying that than are arguing against it.

Here’s what I want to say to those of you who are tempted to jump ship: As Gavin Ortlund has said, if your tradition is in need of reform, reform it, don’t abandon it. There are no greener pastures, and reformers are often in the minority, just like the Protestant Reformers were in the early 1500s. But everything starts small. And if you will see the work of reform as the work of a lifetime, and if you will see the Free Will Baptist tradition and the wider Reformed tradition it’s a part of, and the ante-Nicene fathers before the radical changes in worship in the fourth century—all traditions that believe in grounding worship firmly in the teaching and example of the apostles in Scripture—it will be so much better. If you’ll work on embodying solid liturgical practice that is within that tradition of *sola Scriptura*, the sufficiency of Scripture, the ordinary means of grace, the apostolic witness, the regulative principle, etc., you’ll find it’s possible to have both/and. You’ll find it’s possible to embody the depth and transcendence you long for while not abandoning your tradition and its commitment to *sola Scriptura*. And you’ll also find that your tradition is much more broad and diverse than you might think from your twenty-first century vantage point.

That is what reform is all about—and if nobody stuck around and reformed anything, nothing good would ever happen in this world.

Now a word about your friends who are still concerned about cultural relevance and whom you  criticize for being stuck in the early 2000s mindset of a monoculture. These friends are also questioning things and sensing a need for reform. And just because you don’t see their solutions as consistent as yours doesn’t mean you shouldn’t benefit from their friendship and fellowship, pray for them and their churches, and rejoice in what God is doing through them. “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.” You might be surprised at how many questions and doubts your cultural-relevance-minded friend has about the state of things in evangelical church life, worship, et cetera.

I spend every day of my life with members of Generation Z, and I find that almost every one of them, across the spectrum of worship, inside and outside the Free Will Baptist denomination, is concerned about reforming worship. They are just on different points along the spectrum. I encourage all of you to work and pray together about how we can join our hands and be respectful of each other and work to reform our worship, indeed our whole church life, according to the Scriptures—the authorial intent of Christ and the apostles about the how and why of worship—respecting our tradition and the wider Reformed tradition we belong to, and going back to the early church fathers who deeply valued New Testament worship.