

The Regulative Principle of Worship

by Derek Thomas

Put simply, the regulative principle of worship states that the corporate worship of God is to be founded upon specific directions of Scripture. On the surface, it is difficult to see why anyone who values the authority of Scripture would find such a principle objectionable. Is not the whole of life itself to be lived according to the rule of Scripture? This is a principle dear to the hearts of all who call themselves biblical Christians. To suggest otherwise is to open the door to antinomianism and license.

But things are rarely so simple. After all, the Bible does not tell me whether I may or may not listen with profit to a Mahler symphony, find stamp-collecting rewarding, or enjoy ferretbreeding as a useful occupation even though there are well-meaning but misguided Bible-believing Christians who assert with dogmatic confidence that any or all of these violate God's will. Knowing God's will in any circumstance is an important function of every Christian's life, and fundamental to knowing it is a willingness to submit to Scripture as God's authoritative Word for all ages and circumstances. But what exactly does biblical authority mean in such circumstances?

Well, Scripture lays down certain specific requirements: for example, we are to worship with God's people on the Lord's Day, and we should engage in useful work and earn our daily bread. In addition, covering every possible circumstance, Scripture lays down a general principle: "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" ([Rom. 12:1–2](#)). Clearly, all of life is to be regulated by Scripture, whether by express commandment or prohibition or by general principle. There is therefore, in one sense, a regulative principle for all of life. In everything we do, and in some form or another, we are to be obedient to Scripture.

However, the Reformers (John Calvin especially) and the Westminster Divines (as representative of seventeenth-century puritanism) viewed the matter of corporate worship differently. In this instance, a general principle of obedience to Scripture is insufficient; there must be (and is) a specific prescription governing how God is to be worshiped corporately. In the public worship of God, specific requirements are made, and we are not free either to ignore them or to add to them. Typical by way of formulation are the words of Calvin: “God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his Word” (“The Necessity of Reforming the Church”); and the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689: “The acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures” (22.1).

Where does the Bible teach this? In more places than is commonly imagined, including the constant stipulation of the book of Exodus with respect to the building of the tabernacle that everything be done “after the pattern ... shown you” (Ex. 25:40); the judgment pronounced upon Cain’s offering, suggestive as it is that his offering (or his heart) was deficient according to God’s requirement (Gen. 4:3–8); the first and second commandments showing God’s particular care with regard to worship (Ex. 20:2–6); the incident of the golden calf, teaching as it does that worship cannot be offered merely in accord with our own values and tastes; the story of Nadab and Abihu and the offering of “strange fire” (Lev. 10); God’s rejection of Saul’s non-prescribed worship — God said, “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22); and Jesus’ rejection of Pharisaical worship according to the “tradition of the elders” (Matt. 15:1–14). All of these indicate a rejection of worship offered according to values and directions other than those specified in Scripture.

Of particular significance are Paul’s responses to errant public worship at Colossae and Corinth. At one point, Paul characterizes the public worship in Colossae as *ethelothreskia* (Col. 2:23), variously translated as “will worship” (KJV) or “self-made religion” (ESV). The Colossians had introduced elements that were clearly unacceptable (even if they were claiming an angelic source for their actions — one possible interpretation of Col. 2:18, the “worship of angels”). Perhaps it is in the Corinthian use (abuse) of tongues and prophecy that we find the clearest indication of the apostle’s willingness to “regulate” corporate worship. He regulates both the

number and order of the use of spiritual gifts in a way that does not apply to “all of life”: no tongue is to be employed without an interpreter (1 Cor. 14:27–28) and only two or three prophets may speak, in turn (vv. 29–32). At the very least, Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians underlines that corporate worship is to be regulated and in a manner that applies differently from that which is to be true for all of life.

The result? Particular elements of worship are highlighted: reading the Bible (1 Tim. 4:13); preaching the Bible (2 Tim. 4:2); singing the Bible (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) — the Psalms as well as Scripture songs that reflect the development of redemptive history in the birth-life-death-resurrection-ascension of Jesus; praying the Bible — the Father’s house is “a house of prayer” (Matt. 21:13); and seeing the Bible in the two sacraments of the church, baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38–39; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; Col. 2:11–12). In addition, occasional elements such as oaths, vows, solemn fasts and thanksgivings have also been recognized and highlighted (see Westminster Confession of Faith 21:5).

It is important to realize that the regulative principle as applied to public worship frees the church from acts of impropriety and idiocy — we are not free, for example, to advertise that performing clowns will mime the Bible lesson at next week’s Sunday service. Yet it does not commit the church to a “cookie-cutter,” liturgical sameness. Within an adherence to the principle there is enormous room for variation—in matters that Scripture has not specifically addressed (adiaphora). Thus, the regulative principle as such may not be invoked to determine whether contemporary or traditional songs are employed, whether three verses or three chapters of Scripture are read, whether one long prayer or several short prayers are made, or whether a single cup or individual cups with real wine or grape juice are utilized at the Lord’s Supper. To all of these issues, the principle “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40) must be applied. However, if someone suggests dancing or drama is a valid aspect of public worship, the question must be asked — where is the biblical justification for it? (To suggest that a preacher moving about in the pulpit or employing “dramatic” voices is “drama” in the sense above is to trivialize the debate.) The fact that both may be (to employ the colloquialism) “neat” is debatable and beside the point; there’s no shred of biblical evidence, let alone mandate, for either. So it is superfluous to argue from the poetry of the Psalms or the example of David dancing before the ark (naked, to be sure) unless we are willing to abandon all the received rules of biblical interpretation. It is a salutary fact that no office of “choreographer” or

“producer/director” existed in the temple. The fact that both dance and drama are valid Christian pursuits is also beside the point.

What is sometimes forgotten in these discussions is the important role of conscience. Without the regulative principle, we are at the mercy of “worship leaders” and bullying pastors who charge noncompliant worshipers with displeasing God unless they participate according to a certain pattern and manner. To the victims of such bullies, the sweetest sentences ever penned by men are, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also” (WCF 20:2). To obey when it is a matter of God’s express prescription is true liberty; anything else is bondage and legalism.

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