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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

The Regulative Principle of Worship

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*" (Romans 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).



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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*” (Exodus 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 (Genesis 4:3–8); the first and second commandments showing God’s particular care with regard to worship (Exodus 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*” (Leviticus 10); God’s rejection of Saul’s non-prescribed worship — God said, “*to obey is better than sacrifice*” (1 Samuel 15:22); and Jesus’ rejection of Pharisaical worship according to the “*tradition of the elders*” (Matthew 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* (Colossians 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 Colossians 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 Corinthians 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 Timothy 4:13); preaching the Bible (2 Timothy 4:2); singing the Bible (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 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*” (Matthew 21:13); and seeing the Bible in the two sacraments of the church, baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38–39; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Colossians 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 Corinthians 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?



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(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 worshippers 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. ~ **Dr. Derek W.H. Thomas - Senior minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., and Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.**

Calvinism Isn’t Enough

“*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,*” Charles Dickens wrote in his classic *A Tale of Two Cities*. Perhaps years from now historians will reflect on the state of Calvinism at the beginning of the twenty-first century and offer similar commentary about the historico-theological tale of two, three, or four different shades of Calvinism. Perhaps the future thoroughgoing Calvinist editors of *Time* magazine will come out with a top-ten list called “*Ten Ways God Changed the World as He Sovereignly Worked Through the Secondary Cause of Our March 12, 2009, Top Ten List.*” And perhaps, years from now, Collin Hansen at The Gospel Coalition will write a follow-up book titled *We’re Neither as Young Nor as Restless as We Used to Be, But We’re Still Reformed.*

Recovering the Meaning of Reformed

It’s hard to know what may come of this so-called “*New Calvinism.*” However, we do know that if the New Calvinism does in fact endure, it will endure only because it becomes firmly established on the old Calvinism of John Calvin himself—the same Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther, Augustine, and the apostle Paul, which is nothing less and nothing more than the all-encompassing gospel-religion of our eternal and triune God—a religion, in the best sense of the term, existing in and among people of every tribe, language, and nation whom our Lord has sovereignly called into an eternal relationship with Himself through the redeeming work of the Son and the applying work of the Spirit.



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The Calvinism I'm describing is a historically and ecclesiastically grounded Calvinism established within and upon that which our covenant Lord established and against which the gates of hell shall not prevail—the church of Jesus Christ. And we, the called-out ones, are the confessing church of Jesus Christ, and have been given ordinary means of God's grace (the Word, prayer, and the sacraments, that is, all aspects of worship for all of life) through which God has promised to convict, convince, convert, equip, purify, discipline, sanctify, and sustain to the end, that we would love God, glorify God, and enjoy God forever.

Against such, there's no argument. However, argument does exist over the very meanings of some of the words I have used to describe this old Calvinism. Words such as covenantal, church, confessing, and sacrament represent particular doctrinal affirmations of historic, confessional Reformed theology to which I adhere, but to which many churchmen, past and present, do not adhere while at the same time using the words Reformed and Calvinist to refer to themselves. As to whether or not this phenomenon of Reformed classification is appropriate, many have disagreed, and they disagree on reasoned grounds and on all sides of confessional Protestantism: Anglican, Baptist, Dutch Reformed, Lutheran, and Presbyterian. On the one hand, the words Reformed and Calvinist are historically and ecclesiastically rooted in confessional Reformed "*theology, piety, and practice,*" to employ the language of R. Scott Clark in his helpful epilogue, "*Predestination Is Not Enough,*" in *Recovering the Reformed Confession* (P&R, 2008). Yet, at the same time, there is a foundational doctrinal element that is common to all our confessions and to which all confessional Protestants adhere. It is the overwhelming, overarching, and often underrated doctrine of God.

Calvinists new and old, around the world, have been convinced biblically of this one crucial tenet of historic, confessional Calvinism: God's sovereignty over all—life, death, pain, disasters, relationships, salvation, condemnation, the good things, the bad things, the big things, the little things, the in-between things, and all the things we don't even know about or can't even see—over all. Simply put, we believe that God is God.

A Younger, New, Old Calvinist

For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, I am a confessional Presbyterian. When I say "*confessional,*" I am referring to the confessional standards I affirm as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, namely, the Westminster Standards, which I believe contain carefully worded, helpful, and generally accurate summaries of biblical doctrine. As such, while I don't officially represent the Dutch Reformed Calvinist churches, I do nevertheless consider myself a "*Reformed*" churchman. And although I've never been much for "*isms,*" I do consider myself a Calvinist who has been entrenched in the so-called "*New Calvinism*" for about fifteen years. Allow me to explain.

Not only was I not raised going to church regularly, I wasn't raised around Presbyterian and Reformed circles. In fact, when I became a Christian at fifteen, it was through the ministry of a gospel-preaching but decidedly anti-Calvinist Southern Baptist church where I later went on staff. For the most part, I thought all Presbyterians and all those who got babies wet were just plain liberal, unbiblical, and, generally speaking, bound for hell.



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I didn't realize there were entirely different types of Presbyterians—those who believe the Bible and those who don't. And later on, much to my disappointment, I realized there were different types of Baptists too—those who believe the Bible and those who say they do but actually don't.

Although my first pastor didn't teach me Reformed theology, he did nevertheless teach me a great deal about how to study the Bible and why I should love the God of the Bible. Although he may not have realized it at the time, that godly man of the Word was teaching me to know and love the God of Scripture, who, as it turns out, is the same God of Reformed theology—the same God of Calvin and, perhaps I should add, the same God of Charles Spurgeon and John Bunyan.

Of course, Calvin, Luther, Cranmer, Edwards, and Spurgeon disagreed on various doctrinal matters. And while there are obvious doctrinal differences among men like Mark Dever, Sinclair Ferguson, Mike Horton, John MacArthur, John Piper, and R.C. Sproul, just to name a few, we nevertheless confess the same sovereign God over all—as well as all that confession carries with it in every area of doctrine. And while we are all fully aware of the doctrinal differences that exist among us, there does exist a significant doctrinal thread that binds us together. For the past few generations that thread has been somewhat uncommon and hard to find among professing evangelicals throughout the world, but is now, as Time magazine, Hansen, and others have rightly pointed out, a very common thread weaving together men and women, young and old, black and white, South and North American, Dutch and British, who have come to understand, affirm, and teach biblical doctrines of God, man, sin, and salvation, even when it means real turmoil, real persecution, and real ecclesiastical and familial division.

Calvinism isn't Enough

When I finally came to affirm the biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty after fighting against it with all the free will I could muster, I found it wasn't merely predestination that governed my theology. Rather, it was a more biblical knowledge of God Himself that began to change every aspect of my theology, starting with my knowledge of our gracious and just God and my knowledge of my dead and depraved self, which is precisely where Calvin started his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and where the synod of churchmen at Dordrecht (1618–19) hung their doctrinal hats in combating the Arminian Remonstrants.

In essence, the Reformed doctrines of grace as taught by Calvin and by every other faithful student of God's Word throughout history, gave me a new hermeneutical lens through which I began to interpret all of Scripture. At the time, it wasn't my foremost concern to wear a particular label, and because of the great respect I had for men on all sides of the Reformed camp, it was my foremost concern to study the Word of God and to study the theology of men of God throughout history who studied the Word of God to the end that I might rightly preach and teach the Word of God and submit myself to the ecclesiastical body that I believe to be in closest accord with Scripture.

My desire then, as it is now, is to think, speak, and act biblically and not to base my doctrines, my affiliations, or my allegiances on a respected name, a "successful" ministry, or an historically faithful or unfaithful denomination. This, in essence, is the predominant mind set of the New Calvinists, just as it was the mind set of Calvin himself, who was concerned neither with keeping up unbiblical appearances nor with keeping the Roman Catholic status quo.



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A Really Radical Reformation

Although I very much want to preserve and define the words Calvinism, Reformed, and Presbyterian carefully and appropriately along historical and confessional lines (as do confessional Baptists, Lutherans, et al.), I also want to recognize and rejoice that so many young, restless, and reforming New Calvinists are so incredibly passionate and so gloriously gospel-centered as they are being reformed by our mutually worshiped sovereign God, according to Scripture, in God's sovereign timing and for God's sovereign glory.

In truth, day by day we're all growing a little older, a little more willing to settle down and listen to our faithful forefathers, and a little less eager to jump on any sort of personality-driven bandwagons. And for what it's worth, I think this is precisely the way Calvin (and all the old and New Calvinists) would want to see true, lasting reformation take place in the church and around the world. However, considering he wanted no stone ever to mark his grave, Calvin would likely raise the more radical question of whether we should employ his name at all in our doctrinal shorthand. He would probably prefer instead that we simply employ the name of our sovereign and gracious Lord, who is sovereign over the New Calvinists, the old Calvinists, and all the Calvinists yet to come—all of whom desire simply to be known as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. ~ *Dr. Burk Parsons - Editor of Tabletalk magazine and serves as senior pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla.*

Trials' Lessons: Increased Wisdom

“But where can wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its value, nor is it found in the land of the living” (Job 28:12-13).

The supernatural wisdom believers need in order to understand their trials is simply not available from our society. During Job's ordeal he soon learned the utter inadequacy both of his reason and his friends' misguided advice. That led him to the profound conclusion that the Lord's wisdom is the only source for comprehending life and all its difficulties.

Wisdom in general has always been among the highest, most respected virtues believers can have. The Lord was greatly pleased when Solomon asked for wisdom rather than riches or power (1 Kings 3:5-13), and Solomon later set forth the basic importance of God's wisdom: *“For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6).*

God's wisdom puts things in the right perspective during trials and helps us endure them. But as we have already noted, it is not something we will have automatically. The apostle James, in the context of a passage about trials, says we must ask for wisdom: *“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).*

Once we have the Lord's wisdom and realize that we have become more and more dependent on Him, we'll be like Job, who received this answer to his earlier questions: *“Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (28:28).* ~ *Dr. John MacArthur*



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If you have a May birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt (gwlcfl0415@gmail.com).

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner May 2020

Elyse T. (1)

Sarah B. (22)

Mike M. (22)

Jackson T. (22)

Brian R. (26)

John H. (30)

Tom and Marcy S. (22)

Ben and Charlene S. (25)

Avoiding a Hardened Conscience

We are warned not to allow ourselves to become hardened, because if we look at the whole concept of hardening in its biblical perspective, we see that something happens to us through repeated sins. Our consciences become seared. The more we commit a particular sin, the less remorse we feel from it. Our hearts are recalcitrant through repeated disobedience.

When God hardens the heart, all He does is step away and stop striving with us. For example, the first time I commit a particular sin, my conscience bothers me. In His grace, God is convicting me of that evil. God is intruding into my life, trying to persuade me to stop this wickedness. If He wants to harden me, all He has to do is to stop rebuking me, stop nudging me, and just give me enough rope to hang myself.

We see in Scripture that when God hardens hearts, He does not force people to sin; rather, He gives them their freedom to exercise the evil of their own desires (James 1:13-15). ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



*West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership*

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