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The Regulative Principle of Worship is a Biblical Doctrine

JEFF ROBINSON, PHD

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I argued that the regulative principle of worship is a Baptist doctrine. But any Baptist worth his or her salt will ask the more salient question: But is it a biblical doctrine?

I want to argue that it is in fact a biblical doctrine and give a brief biblical defense from 32,000 feet. As I sought to show last time, Baptist confessions have articulated it and numerous important figures who have roamed the landscape of the Baptist tradition held it in earnest.

Granted, there is not a single text that may be accessed which says, “You shall only use in gathered worship those elements taught by precept or example in Scripture.” But if you take the overall witness of Scripture as to how God expects to be worshiped, I believe a strong case may be made.

Such passages include:

- The first four commandments found in [Exodus 20:3-4, 7-8](#). All deal largely with worship. This tells us worship of God is a primary issue, one that God takes with blood-earnest seriousness. Therefore, we should treat it with the utmost

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care. There should be no place for flippant or breezy worship among the people of God.

- The details given by God in the construction of the furniture and garments of worship in [Exodus 25-30](#). In [Exodus 30:33, 38](#), God promises the death penalty for the misuse of anointing oil and incense. From this, it seems that God is meticulous in how he ought to be worshiped.
- The warning of the Israelites in [Deuteronomy 12:30-32](#) not to get their ideas of worship from the world around them, but only from God's revelation. This command is relevant for the church today for many obvious reasons. It is certainly admirable to want to appeal to the lost and the church that neglects the Great Commission is disobeying the clear command of Scripture. But, we must remember the wise axiom: What you win them with is what you win them to. The same principle applies to worship.
- The death of Nadab and Abihu in [Leviticus 10:1-3](#). God struck them dead for offering "strange fire" to the Lord. This illustrates the seriousness with which God takes the worship of himself.
- The disobedience of Saul in offering the sacrifices Samuel was to have offered in [1 Samuel 10:8](#) and [13:8-13](#).
- The death of Uzzah for touching the Ark of the Covenant in [2 Samuel 6:3-8](#). Some object to this text, saying, "But Uzzah's motive was pure. God must have been up to something else." Certainly, Uzzah's motive can be assumed to be pure in keeping the Ark from falling off a cart, but God struck him down for his irreverence. This seems to run counter to the argument of some contemporary worship leaders who say a worshiper's attitude, not how he worships, matters to God. No doubt, our attitude and posture before God are vital, but God demands to be worshiped in spirit as well as in truth ([John 4:24](#)).
- The leprosy of King Uzziah for offering incense in [2 Chronicles 26:18-21](#). Only priests were allowed to offer incense by divine fiat. Uzziah's wrong worship led to God's immediate judgment.
- The sin of King Ahaz for replacing the altar of worship in [2 Kings 16:10-16](#). God did not command him to do this.
- Jesus' rejection of the Pharisees' worship in [Mark 7:6-7](#). They worshiped in vain, Christ said, because their doctrines of worship were the precepts of men.

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A series of questions often arises when discussing this doctrine today: Does that mean we can only use traditional music styles? Does that disqualify the use of musical instruments? Isn't that putting a straight jacket on worship?

Granted, those are excellent questions, but I think they miss the point of the regulative principle of worship. The regulative principle merely expresses the important truth that God is perfect and knows best how he ought to be worshiped. Since this is true, he has revealed that to us in Scripture. A better question, I think is this: How else would we know the best way to worship God other than relying on his own revealed Word? I think [Hebrews 12:28](#) gets at the heart of the matter, calling God a consuming fire who is to be worshiped "in reverence and awe."

Thus, the regulative principle might best be viewed as guard rails in which God graciously sets the bounds for worship that is centered on himself. Thus, it is not limiting but loving. The stories of Uzzah, Uzziah, and others in the OT (and Ananias and Saphira in the NT) surely attest to the loving nature of God's revelation on this central issue.

There is significant freedom here with regard to issues such as style, instrumentation, and the like. The Particular Baptists and other Puritans of the post-Reformation period referred to these realities—such as the time of meeting on the Lord's Day, whether or not to have Sunday school as part of church life, etc.—as the circumstances of worship. They distinguished circumstances, which should be governed by sanctified wisdom and the light of nature, from the elements of worship, which Scripture regulates. The two are often confused today when the regulative principle is discussed.

Thus, the regulative principle keeps the saints of God from deviating away from truth and plunging headlong into what the Puritans called sinful "will-worship." The regulative principle asks such question as "Is our worship God-centered?" "Are our song lyrics faithfully teaching the truths of Scripture?" "Does our worship focus on God and not ourselves?" "Is every element contained in our worship service grounded in God's Word?" "Does it seek to glorify God?"

Were Baptists and other evangelicals to recover this biblical truth and practice it thoughtfully, carefully, joyfully, winsomely, and diligently, might a great peace come to the awful battles within our churches that have been (sadly) called the "worship wars?"

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Jeff is a senior editor for The Gospel Coalition. A native of Blairsville, Ga., Jeff holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from The University of Georgia, a Master of Divinity in biblical and theological studies and a Ph.D. in historical theology with an emphasis on Baptist history from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. He is pastor of New City Church in Louisville, KY. Jeff and his wife Lisa have been married for 19 years and have four children.

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