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Where Circus and Church Meet: A Plea for the Recovery of Sola Scriptura in Worship

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I struggled to keep a straight face when he asked me the question.

I was a candidate for the pastorate of this Baptist church, one that was nearly 200 years old, one that had sprung up as a result of the Second Great Awakening in the Ohio Valley.

Surely my ears were deceiving me: did this dear brother in Christ, this member of the pastoral search team, really just ask me, “What is your view of clown ministry in the local church?”

A thousand disparate thoughts catapulted through my mind over the next thirty seconds as I sat with the search team stunned in awkward silence; Giant cobalt blue shoes. Oversized purple and pink polka dot ties. Orange floppy hats with a flower that squirts water. Miniature red sports cars. The Shriner’s Day parade in my Deep South hometown. How many Gospel clowns fit in a Volkswagen? Ronald McDonald leads worship. The Gospel. Heaven. Hell.

Surely this was one of my pink elephant dreams. But it was all too real. Yes, this church had clowns: aggressive, hyper-involved clowns, a reality that would be a deal-breaker or

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deal-maker for the future pastor. “Okay,” said I, syllables stumbling from my lips as if upended by a pair of candy-striped oversized shoes. “These clowns work with the children, right?”

“Well, no,” said the church leader. “They do evangelistic outreach . . . And some other stuff.” I later learned what the “other stuff” entailed; the clown troupe often performed “dramatic skits” during the morning worship service on the Lord’s Day. And there were also mimes; they had their own service occasionally on Sunday nights, using no words and trapping themselves inside invisible boxes to the glory of God.

This congregation took its clowning seriously and, needless to say, I was not a fit candidate to serve as its preaching elder. Members blanched at my insistence on applying the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* as regulative for both corporate worship and external church ministry.

Sadly, this is not an isolated instance of “innovative” worship.

One church several years ago installed a baptismal pool in the shape of a fire truck complete with red paint and lights (it has since been removed). The baptistery was specifically designed for baptizing children who made a profession of faith. When a young one emerged from underwater during baptism, streamers and confetti streamed skyward from the small pool and the truck’s lights flashed with two-alarm luminosity. The pastor said this unsubtle device was installed to make baptism more palatable and “interesting” to children.

These days, it seems, many Baptist churches are suffering from the same peculiarly Americanized form of worship common to contemporary churches. The above true story is Exhibit A of what Michael Horton describes as a “greasy familiarity” with which modern-day Christians approach God.

This “greasy familiarity,” Horton writes, is based on “The belief that we have direct and immediate access to him (God) whenever and however we want. Whenever sincere people gather in a building to worship according to their personal tastes and opinions, God is impressed that they took the time, that they cared enough to worship. It was ‘real.’ They were ‘vulnerable.’ They got ‘honest before God.’”

But what is the root issue with such contrivances as “Gospel clowns” and worship that is heavy on plucky familiarity with God and light on theologically informed proclamation? It is a loss of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) or the absolute sufficiency and authority of Scripture in the corporate worship and life of the local congregation. Evangelicals desperately need to recover this regulative principle in order

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to remove unbiblical worship and fanciful worship and outreach elements from their midst, to build healthier Christians and healthier congregations.

Taproot issue: authority

Most conservative Baptists agree that the Bible is inspired by God and many consent to the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. However, it is Scripture as the church's sole authority, its sufficiency, in matters of worship and church life that seems to have been rejected, at least in practice, by modern day Baptists.

As in contemporary culture, the primary issue at play in local congregations is that of authority. The very notion of authority is rejected by many in a postmodern culture and the church has followed, to great detriment, in its wake. The lone authority typically affirmed by many church members is that of the autonomous individual.

But authority does not exist in a vacuum; someone or something will inevitably take the lead in a church where Scripture is no longer viewed as sufficient. When the regulative principle is cast aside, authority will likely arise in one of three forms:

- **Naïve tradition.** This is not tradition in the sense of Roman Catholicism's veneration of it, but is tradition of a sort that argues, "We've always done it this way, so it would be unconscionable to do it any other way." A hymn or chorus with unbiblical content or a troupe performing "interpretative movement" remains as an element of corporate worship because it has existed unchallenged for decades within a given church body.
- **Religious experience.** Often, mystical experience will help formulate doctrine for a local church. I once attended a church where leaders trotted out a particular emotion-laden song when they felt the church was in the midst of a "spiritual dry spell." Every time it was sung, tears flowed freely from the congregation, and a "mini revival" usually ensued. The sermon would be set aside and parishioners concluded that "God showed up today with such power that we didn't even have preaching." Paul's words in [Romans 10:17](#), "Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the Word of Christ," seem to place a premium on preaching, but hey, who can argue with results, right? This is a first cousin to the third form of authority.
- **Unprincipled pragmatism.** This form of authority provides the answer to the question "What works?" Pragmatists sometimes argue, "the message is unchanging, but the method is always changing." Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) employed this strategy through such methods as the "anxious bench" to "stir up" revival during the Second Great Awakening. His methods

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manipulated emotions, which, for Finney, was the key in leading sinners to decide to follow Jesus.

The regulative principle—What is it?

The regulative principle of worship is based on the Reformers' application (John Calvin and his progeny, the Puritans, in particular recovered and adhered to this doctrine) in the area of worship and church life of their principal *sola Scriptura* position. In essence, the regulative principle—as defined by most Reformed theologians—holds that true worship may include only those ways which God has either expressly commanded in Scripture or which may be deduced from Scripture by “good and necessary consequence,” while false worship is anything done in worship which God has not expressly described.

Baptists have a substantive history of subscription to the regulative principle. For example, article 7 of *The 1644 London Confession* established the way in which the church determines how God should be worshiped:

The Rule of this Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience, concerning the worship and service of God, and all other Christian duties, is not man's inventions, opinions, devices, laws, constitutions, or traditions, unwritten whatsoever but only the word of God contained in the Canonical Scriptures.

Similarly, Chapter XXII, Article I of the venerable *The Second London Confession of 1689* states:

The Light of Nature shews that there is a God who hath Lordship, and Soveraigntye (Sovereignty) over all; is just, good, and doth good unto all; and is therefore, to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the Heart, and all the Soul, and with all the Might. But the acceptable way of Worshipping the true God, is instituted by himself; and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations, and devices of Men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representations, or any other way, not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.

Not only does the *Second London Confession* establish the reality of the regulative principle, but it also sets forth the elements that the Bible prescribes for corporate worship. This is the genius of the regulative principle; there is no guesswork when it comes to deciding whether or not an element is fit for corporate worship. The *Second London Confession* argued, correctly, I think, that God has provided such as list of fit elements within His special revelation:

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The reading of the Scriptures, Preaching, and hearing the word of God, teaching and admonishing one another in Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual songs, singing with grace in our Hearts to the Lord; as also the Administration of baptism, and the Lords Supper are all parts of the Religious worship of God, to be performed in obedience to him, with understanding, faith, reverence, and Godly fear; moreover solemn humiliation, with fastings; and thanksgiving upon special occasions, ought to be used in an holy and religious manner.

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Numerous Baptist pastors and theologians from the pages of history have subscribed to Scripture's sufficiency and authority in matters of church worship and practice including Benjamin Keach, John Gill, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, John Leadley Dagg and James Petigru Boyce.

Gill is exemplary here; one of the first major writing Baptist theologians and pastors in England, Gill (1697-1771) propounded his view of the regulative principle most clearly in a pamphlet entitled "The Dissenter's Reasons for Separating from the Church of England." Gill penned it in 1751 in response to a Welch Anglican who sought to have all dissenting children in Wales catechized according to the *Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*. It was an attempt to expunge them of Baptist beliefs.

Gill hammered the established church on several points he viewed as unscriptural including its improper administration of the Lord's Supper and baptism, its 'sign of the cross' in baptism, its practice of infant baptism, its unbiblical system of church polity, and its wearing of vestments. Gill wrote of these things, "they are nowhere enjoined in the word of God." One can only imagine what Gill might have written in response to "gospel clowns."

Conclusion

My denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, waged a strenuous warfare in the 1980s in which it decisively defeated the deadly sloth of liberalism, drove liberal theology from its ranks and re-established the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

Now, the crying need of the hour within the SBC and among our fellow Baptists is to recover the sufficiency and authority of God's Word and to rediscover the regulative principle to inform the worship and life of the church. May it please God to grant us grace sufficient for such a reformation.

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