

The Regulative Principle of the Gospel

When we, the people of God, come together for worship, we are to follow God's prescription for worship. Our worship is to be regulated by God's Word alone. We are not to add to nor subtract from God's prescribed form of worship. Innovation has no place in the worship of God. Not only is it a sin to neglect what God has commanded in worship, but it is also a sin to engage in what God has *not* commanded in worship. God killed Nadab and Abihu for doing that "*which He had not commanded them*"; their attempt to introduce into worship what God had not commanded was "*strange fire*" that God hates (Lev. 10:1-3).

The truth that nothing is done in worship that is not prescribed in God's Word has come to be known as the Regulative Principle of Worship. The following are some examples of how we abide by this principle: We do not engage in man-made devices in worship, such as participating in or watching drama or singing uninspired songs. We do not utilize images in worship, such as crosses, doves representing the Holy Spirit, or pictures of "Jesus." We do not celebrate any holidays in worship, such as Christmas or Easter. We do not observe any of the Old Testament elements in worship that typified and were fulfilled in Christ, such as sacrifices, feasts, musical instruments, and sabbath days.

Yet there are many who take great pains to follow the Regulative Principle of Worship whose worship is actually an abomination to God; their supposed "pure" worship is actually open idolatry. How can this be? It is because they do not believe the *Regulative Principle of the Gospel*.

In Exodus 28, God gave specific commands in exact detail about the high priest. He was to come before God only in the way prescribed. One of the commands concerned the hem of Aaron's garment. There were to be "*a bell of gold and a pomegranate; a bell of gold and a pomegranate; on the hem of the robe all around. And it shall be on Aaron for ministering; and its sound shall be heard in his going into the sanctuary before the face of Jehovah, and in his coming out, that he should not die*" (Ex. 28:34-35). The people of Israel knew that as long as the sound of the bell was heard, God had not killed the high priest. The high priest was not to enter the sanctuary within the veil, to the front of the mercy seat, at all times; he was always to enter with blood (Lev. 16). He was always to enter in God's prescribed way, with all the required vestments. If he did not, then God would kill him. That is how seriously God took it. God would not have the high priest making up his own way to Him.

We worship the same God today. God has not changed. There is still only one way to God – through the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of the Lamb of God, which was pictured in the Old Testament high priesthood and sacrifices. Jesus Christ "*entered once for all into the [Holy of] Holies, having procured everlasting redemption*" (Heb. 9:12). The gospel is the good news of salvation conditioned on the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ alone. Any other way to God is a false way. Any other way leads to death. Any man-made devices to get to God, any notion of a "salvation" that is conditioned on the sinner, is wicked in the sight of God. He will not have it. God's way, put forth in His Word, is the only way. This is the Regulative Principle of the Gospel.

There are many churches out there who say they hold to the Regulative Principle of Worship. They are very scrupulous about only worshiping in the way prescribed in the Bible. But they have missed the whole point of the Regulative Principle of Worship.

Why did God kill Nadab and Abihu for offering strange fire? It was because they tried to come to God on their own terms. They did not think it was such a big deal to bring their own works which God had not commanded. They thought that God's way was really just a matter of preference. They thought that adding their own ideas – their own works – to the equation would be acceptable to God. They thought that God would be tolerant of other ways, as long as the other ways were sincere. They did not believe the gospel.

Yet what do many, if not most, who say they hold to the Regulative Principle of Worship think of those who try to add their own works to the work of Christ? They consider at least some of them to be their brothers and sisters in Christ. “Oh, they may be a little inconsistent in their doctrine, but they really sincerely love Jesus and try to serve him the best they can,” they say. What these people who are so meticulous in their worship do not realize is that the Regulative Principle of Worship is a reflection of THE GOSPEL and that the Regulative Principle of the Gospel is a LIFE AND DEATH matter. They would not dare set foot in a place that has a graven image in it, but they would count those who come to God on their own terms as their brothers. This shows that they, too, do not believe the Regulative Principle of the Gospel; they believe that there are “many paths to God.” They would tell God, “You were too harsh with Nadab and Abihu. After all, they were just sincerely trying to please you. So they came in a way you did not prescribe; are you so mean as to kill them just because they didn't believe exactly the right things?” They would scoff at the preachers of the true gospel and say to them, “Do you mean to tell me that someone who ignorantly says that Christ died for all without exception and that the sinner has to do his part in order for God to save him is lost? Are you so mean as to say that everyone is lost who doesn't believe exactly the right things about the ground of salvation? Why, that's foolishness.” Yet *“the word of the cross is foolishness to those being lost, but to us being saved, [it] is [the] power of God. ... For since in the wisdom of God the world [by] wisdom did not know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of preaching to save the ones believing”* (1 Cor. 1:18,21).

These “tolerant” advocates of the Regulative Principle of Worship do not realize that all their praying and Psalm-singing and preaching and abstaining from innovation is actually an abomination to God, because it flows from a heart that is at enmity against God – one that speaks peace to God's enemies. They think their purity of worship is pleasing to God, when in reality it is a putrid stench in God's nostrils. They think they are serving the true and living God and abstaining from idols, yet in reality they are praying to and singing to and worshiping a god of their own imaginations. They might not have any crosses in their buildings, they might not celebrate any of the man-made holidays, they might stand firmly against drama in worship, and they might not use musical instruments in worship, but they are just as wicked as the Roman Catholic who prays to a statue of co-redemptrix Mary or even an irreligious vile pervert who does not care at all about worship. This holds true as well for those who think that their purity of

worship somehow recommends them to God or makes them more fit or qualified for heaven. If one does not have the Regulative Principle of the Gospel right, then one does not even know what true worship is, even if it is done according to the Regulative Principle of Worship.

We who believe the gospel, we who do not speak peace when there is no peace, realize that all those who do not come GOD'S WAY – through the merits of Christ's blood and righteousness alone – are lost. We realize that before someone can even begin to honor God in worship, he must believe the Regulative Principle of the Gospel. The reason God's people hold to the Regulative Principle of Worship is because we realize that God has ordained it to be a testimony to the Regulative Principle of the Gospel. We regulate our worship according to Scripture because we know that this points to the Ultimate Regulative Principle – the ONE WAY of salvation and fellowship with God through the atoning blood and imputed righteousness of Christ ALONE, without any contribution from the sinner.

Jesus said to him, I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me (John 14:6).

Everyone transgressing and not abiding in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. The [one] abiding in the doctrine of Christ, this one has the Father and the Son (2 John 9).

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