

Infant Baptism and the Regulative Principle of Worship

by

Fred Malone

Our Presbyterian friends often state that the authority for infant baptism comes from "good and necessary inference" of Old Testament circumcision of infants, not from positive command, example, or institution in the New (Warfield, Berkhof, Murray, et al). In fact, they candidly and regularly admit that there is no command or example of infant baptism in the New Testament, or indeed, in all the Scriptures.

Baptists often reject Presbyterian infant baptism by showing that the Paedobaptist ("infant Baptist") brand of covenant theology erroneously allows "good and necessary inference" from Old Testament circumcision to overrule the only positive institution of baptism in the New Testament, namely, that of disciples alone. This is a proper argument. However, few recognize that this Presbyterian error is a violation of their own "regulative principle of worship." Yet, the practice of infant baptism does just that.

This may not seem to be a very significant statement at first, but since the regulative principle is taught and championed by our Presbyterian brethren, it actually is a very serious charge. It means that they contradict their most important principle of worship every time they baptize an infant.

Baptists have held historically to the very same regulative principle of worship, though many have forgotten that today. In fact, we ultimately practice "the baptism of disciples alone" because of it. I am convinced that one reason that some Baptists are becoming Presbyterians is because Baptists do not understand the regulative principle any more.

Obviously, Baptists and Presbyterians cannot both be right on the question of baptism. Granted, this issue is not essential to salvation (as is, for example, justification by faith alone), but it does concern a sacrament of the church and thus cannot be dismissed as unimportant (though some ministers have tried to do just that in order to serve in the Presbyterian ministry). Baptists who are tempted to forsake the theologically troubled Baptist Zion for more comfortable Presbyterianism may not realize that they must violate the Presbyterian (and Baptist) regulative principle of worship to do so.

In order for me to prove my thesis I will first define "the regulative principle" from Presbyterian sources and then show why I believe that infant baptism is a clear violation of that principle.

What is the regulative principle of worship?

According to the Westminster Presbyterian and the 1689 London Baptist Confession (the mother confession of American and Southern Baptists),

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 representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture* (WCF 21:1; italics mine).

This regulative principle teaches that God-approved Christian worship includes only elements and practices "instituted by God Himself limited by his own revealed will [and not] any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture." In other words, speculation, invention, imagination, and uncommanded practices, etc., cannot be permitted to change or neglect instituted worship. Therefore, the only elements of worship approved in the regulative tradition, according to Scripture, are:

Prayers: The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments *instituted by Christ*; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: besides religious oaths and vows, solemn fasting, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in a holy and religious manner (WCF 21:4-5; italics mine).

Prayer, the reading and preaching of Scripture, singing, the sacraments, vows, thanksgivings, etc., are the only authorized elements of Reformed worship. It should be noted that the only sacraments which are approved as elements of worship are those which have been "instituted by Christ" himself, not by "good and necessary inference.

On the other hand, the "normative principle of worship" is practiced by Lutherans, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and, apparently, by many

charismatic and fundamental Baptists. They are joined by a growing number of Southern Baptists who, sometimes ignorantly, have turned from their theological heritage in the regulative.

The normative principle teaches that worship must consist of that which is commanded by God and may also include that which is not specifically prohibited by Scripture. This opens the door to many uncommanded activities which often limit the practice of those commanded elements. The result too often is seen in public worship which has very little Scripture reading and twenty minute sermonettes.

Obviously, the normative principle invites invention, creativity, and new elements of worship which are never commanded or mentioned in Scripture. It also permits practices which are prescribed in Old Testament worship to be used in New Testament Christian worship by "good and necessary inference," even if these practices are not prescribed for Christian worship. This accounts for the traditional differences in worship between those from normative versus regulative backgrounds. It also explains the normative additions of pageantry, altars, priesthoods, vestments, prayer books, mariolatry, prayers to saints, and other practices not instituted by Scripture for Gospel worship. Others today add drama, dance, puppets, clowns, movies, magicians, comedians, weight lifting, high-pressured "altar calls," entertainment, and whatever else their heart desires. When one holds to the normative principle, another must ask: "Where will it end up?"

The regulative principle has always included "that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed" (WCF 1:6). However, these circumstances of worship are always limited to time, place, order of worship, length of worship, language, pews, air conditioning, etc., issues which are common to any human society (see *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, by G. I. Williamson, 161). They have never included new uncommanded activities such as those mentioned above.

Adding to the confusion, others who claim to hold to the regulative principle have redefined the simpler elements of worship to include creative "applications" of those elements by "good and necessary inference." Thus

they justify new practices such as drama as a form of preaching and dance as a form of praise. These are justified by "good and necessary inference" even though such practices are never commanded in either Old Testament worship or New Testament Christian worship. Such teachers have, whether unwittingly or purposefully, returned to the normative principle of worship by adding what Scripture has not specifically prohibited. No amount of protesting to the contrary can change this fact.

In summary, the Reformed regulative principle of worship allows only those elements of worship which have been positively instituted and commanded by God in Scripture.

What does the regulative principle have to do with infant baptism?

Infant baptism violates the regulative principle of worship. Baptism is one of the sacraments which has been "instituted by Christ." Thus it is regulated by God, limited by His revealed will, and prescribed by Holy Scripture. This regulation extends to the subjects of baptism. Who are to be baptized? How are they to be baptized? Why are they to be baptized? To answer these questions we must ask a more basic one: What has been "instituted by Christ?"

Christ's institution of baptism, in its mode, meaning, and subjects is to be regulated by the Word of God. Yet, as Baptists and Paedobaptists agree, the only subjects of baptism which can be conclusively determined by Scripture are professing disciples. Infants are included only by "good and necessary consequence," a normative addition which is never commanded in the Bible. The practice of baptizing babies violates the regulative principle.

Amazingly, Paedobaptist apologist, Pierre Marcel, actually states that God only gives us general instructions concerning the doctrine of baptism and then leaves it up to us to determine its practical application to infants. This is done, he argues, by "normative principles." He compares the practice of infant baptism to the work of application in preaching. This is a woefully inadequate comparison when one considers the Westminster Confession's inclusion of sacraments under the regulative principle of worship. Marcel writes,

The Church never confines herself merely to the letter, but, working from the data of Scripture and under the control of the Holy Spirit, she affirms normative principles and elaborates the consequences and

applications which make her life and development possible and effective. Were it not so, the exercise of the pastoral ministry, the cure of souls, preaching, discipline, and so on, would be absolutely impossible! It is thus that the Church operates when she passes from adult to infant baptism. Scripture affords general instruction on baptism, its meaning and value, and the Church applies it concretely in life. If Scripture assigns to the children of believers the enjoyment of the same privileges as are experienced by those who are of an age to confess their faith, and since it nowhere makes mention of a baptismal ministry which should have been applied to adults born of Christian parents, it has said sufficient on this point, without needing to have prescribed literally the baptism of infants.

It is astonishing that Marcel admits that infant baptism is practiced on "normative principles" and therefore does not need to be prescribed literally by Scripture! This is clearly an application of the normative principle, not the regulative, to a sacrament "instituted by Christ." It is even more astonishing to see how he uses the lack of biblical instruction concerning the baptism of adults who were born to Christian parents. He makes these adult children of believers a special class and then cites the Bible's silence regarding their baptism to justify the baptism of infants.

It is not true that the Scripture is silent on the baptism of "adults born of Christian parents." They, along with adults born of non-Christian parents as well as men and women, boys and girls of every age are commanded by the Lord through the Scripture to repent and believe the gospel. Those who do, regardless of their backgrounds, should, like the first century believers of the New Testament, be baptized (Acts 2:41).

To make a special class out of the adult children of believers and then to equate the Scripture's silence regarding them with its silence on infant baptism is preposterous. Such thinking can lead anywhere, even back to the seven sacraments of Roman Catholicism. After all, the Scripture is no more silent on infant baptism than it is on the administration of last rites.

One fundamental question remains: if Christ did not actually *institute* infant baptism, how can it be, in the language of the confession, a sacrament "instituted by Christ?" Marcel's explanation of infant baptism on "normative principles" constitutes a Paedobaptist affirmation of what has been

maintained in this article, that infant baptism is a violation of the regulative principle of worship and is based upon the normative principle.

When God instituted circumcision, He was very specific to identify its subjects. This is why infants were circumcised. This is in keeping with the regulative principle. Now in this New Testament era are we to assume that the regulative principle concerning the subjects of the sacraments "instituted by Christ" (baptism and the Lord's Supper), limited by God's revealed will, and prescribed by Holy Scripture, are to be left to our application as if it were an uncommanded circumstance of worship? If words mean anything, obviously not. According to the regulative principle, the only subjects of baptism "instituted by Christ" and prescribed in Holy Scripture are disciples.

I am convinced that the "good and necessary inference" which establishes infant baptism, has opened the door to other difficulties within the Reformed and evangelical Christian world. Theonomy, paedocommunion, and more recently, stated applications of the regulative principle of worship which in fact have transformed it into the old normative principle, are three such examples. Or could it be that infant baptism was always based upon the normative principle instead of the regulative? That is my conclusion. Perhaps we all, Presbyterians and Baptists alike, need to recommit ourselves to the biblically based regulative principle of worship and follow it where it leads us.

Neither Baptists nor Paedobaptists have a corner on the truth. Both need to examine our beliefs and practices in the light of God's Word. The heritage which we share in the Protestant Reformation reminds us that the church must be "reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God." Why do we do what we do in worship? How are the sacraments of the church to be observed? What does the Word specifically say about the subjects of baptism? These questions must be answered from the Bible. Such an exercise will prove beneficial for every child of God. Further, it should make us careful not to violate Scripturally regulated worship through the incorporation of uncommanded, uninstituted, unrevealed, and unprescribed practices.