

What is the regulative principle?

This refers to the policy that determines what is allowed in church meetings. Whether one has heard of this term or not, all churches have some kind of principle that regulates worship and church leadership. Essentially there are two opposite positions:

1. Nothing is allowed unless scripture clearly, or by implication, affirms it.
2. Anything is allowed unless scripture prohibits it.

The term 'regulative principle' is applied to Reformed churches that practice the first of these: there must be a clear Biblical command, or apostolic precedent, to support church practice. The Westminster Confession, 1.6 & 21.1, affirmed this in opposition to the practice of Lutherans and Anglicans.

Arminian churches followed the Lutherans and adopted the second position above. This has been called 'the normative principle', which allows virtually anything to take place in meetings – 'what is not forbidden is admissible'. In reality this means that the leaders personally determine what occurs.

An associated matter is that we must have a Biblical hermeneutic (system of interpretation) since some Old Covenant features of worship are prohibited by the New Covenant. Thus all would agree that the church no longer sacrifices sheep and goats after the cross. However, other items of temple worship that are intrinsically connected to blood sacrifices are allowed under the normative principle (such as instrumental music, vestments & buildings). A Biblical hermeneutic shows us that these are not sanctioned by the apostles under the New Covenant. Thus the teaching of the New Testament has priority in determining what is acceptable. We cannot simply pick and choose.

Some issues where scripture is silent (such as the time, length or order of meetings) should be determined by the general principles of God's word, common sense and Christian prudence. Thus beginning a meeting at midnight is foolish today, but during some historical periods of persecution this made sense. We must trust the Holy Spirit to guide us on such minor details.

Clearly the content of our meetings must be Biblical and thus we should follow the Reformed regulative principle. God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word ... since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, 'In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men' (Matt. 15:9). John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, pp. 128-129.

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