

What do we do?

What practices are allowed in church meetings?

Introduction

For some reason believers are still puzzled about this question. It still amazes me since the answer is obvious. Nevertheless there is great confusion about this; even with mature Christians.

Now if the church meets Biblically in a home with a plurality of equal elders and centres on breaking bread and fellowship, the question hardly arises. The church will naturally meet in a Biblical manner and most intrusions just don't apply. However, when the church meets unbiblically with a large congregation in a dedicated building with a hierarchy of leaders and more money than sense, then very great problems arise.

For the sake of all, I will explain what the answer to this question is.

There are two central arguments in this matter:

- We can do nothing except what God specifically commands.
- We can do anything at all unless God specifically forbids it.

These are explained by the Regulative Principle (the former) and the Normative Principle (the latter).

The Normative Principle

This allows for almost anything to occur. Anything is acceptable unless the Bible specifically forbids it. This affects worship, church government and church practice.

It was originally developed by the Lutheran Church but it was followed by the Arminians and Anglicans. So its pedigree is not good.

The question asked by the Normative Principle is, 'Where does Scripture forbid this practice?'

Martin Luther was inconsistent in holding this principle. He was devoted to sola Scriptura in terms of doctrine but when it came to church practice he did not condemn any ceremony unless the Gospel forbade it. Hence the hangover of many Catholic forms in Lutheranism and Anglicanism, despised by the Puritans. Luther was concerned to not be too revolutionary in church reforms for fear of losing the people. So he conformed Lutheran worship to what people were used to.¹

Although accepting many Calvinist doctrines, the Church of England followed Lutheran practice.

The Church hath power to decree rites or ceremonies and authority in controversies of faith; and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything contrary to God's word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to

¹ However, he did not allow instrumental music and called organs 'ensigns of Baal'.

another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ: yet, as it ought not to decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation.

The 39 Articles, Article 20, Of the Authority of the Church.

This badly constructed statement avers two things. Firstly, the church has the power to decree rites and ceremonies. This is wrong, only God can do this as expressed in his Word. Secondly, the church cannot make anything necessary to salvation, except what Scripture states.

There are many items possible today to be allowed in church practice that are obviously wrong but are not forbidden by Scripture. I will list a few:

- Smoking.
- Dancing.
- Screaming.
- Making wild animal noises.
- Laughing uncontrollably.
- Running around the room.
- Having a rock band play loud music.

This is just a small selection.

Clearly, the Normative Principle cannot be accepted by believers who wish to be faithful to the Word of God.

The Regulative Principle

This states that church doctrine and practice must be fully sanctioned by the Bible. Only a command from God allows what we teach and do in church.

While the Normative Principle stems from Luther, the Regulative Principle originates with John Calvin. This is clearly explained in the Westminster Confession.

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.(1) Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word;(2) and 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.

Westminster Confession, 1.6.

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.

Westminster Confession, 21.1.

What about necessary things not explained in the Bible?

These include such things as: what time to meet? How long is the service? How many meetings are required? What meetings can occur during the week? What order of service do we follow?

As mentioned in the Confession, these should be determined, *‘by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word’*.

So, for example, we see a prayer meeting in a home in Scripture that was not a Sunday fellowship meeting (Acts 12:5, 12). This allows for mid-week prayer meetings on a day of our choosing.

We are commanded by divine precedent to meet in homes (unless impossible due to persecution or an emergency). The time is not expressly stated but there is the implication that it is evening or late afternoon-evening (e.g. Acts 20:7). The length of the meeting is obviously flexible. In the early church this was impossible for the many slaves who were believers, so they had to meet at dawn before their duties started. There is no sin in this.

Some things are determined by necessity. For example, in a poorly taught congregation additional meetings will be required for didactic instruction to develop maturity. This will necessitate a mid-week Bible study. This follows Biblical principles to teach believers doctrine.

Regarding liturgy, the lack of a commanded order of service necessitates us to follow the leading of the Spirit. We see Biblical precedents of: singing praise (no instrumental music), prayer, prophetic encouragement, didactic teaching, breaking bread, mutual edification, exhortation, service to one another and hints of a communal meal. How we arrange these things are down to individual choice and necessity.

In general the rules would be:

- Only allow what the Bible expressly commands.
- Regarding minor subordinate details, utilise Biblical wisdom, Biblical precedent and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible gives us general details and not minor details. God expects us to use Spirit-filled wisdom to determine what is right in our circumstances. But these choices must meet with general Biblical principles.

Conclusion

Any sane Biblical Christian can plainly see that the Normative Principle is a recipe for any choice of the flesh. It began with the failure to remove Roman Catholic practices in church meetings and continues today with the introduction of all sorts of Charismatic insanity. It is clearly wrong.

We must abide by the Regulative Principle because it alone obeys the Word of God.

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