

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The First Baptist Distinctive

Part Four: The Rule of Prescription

To understand how Baptists bring the New Testament to bear upon church life, we need to revisit a Reformation dispute between Luther and Zwingli. These two men were leaders of distinct branches of the Reformation: Luther in Wittenberg, and Zwingli in Zurich. They agreed that the existing churches had become corrupted through the addition of Romanist beliefs and practices. They both began by removing the most obviously anti-scriptural doctrines and forms. They disagreed, however, about what to do with Romanist forms and customs that were not authorized by the Bible, but that did not obviously contradict biblical teaching.

Luther argued that whatever did not violate biblical teaching could be retained. If a custom or ritual had become established by long use, removing that custom might prove very upsetting to church members. Luther hoped to avoid controversy and he did not wish to appear to be an extremist. Therefore, he was willing to keep some Roman customs even though he could find little direct biblical support for them. If those customs did not contradict any biblical teaching, he reasoned, then they would do no harm, and they might even do some good.

Zwingli gave just the opposite answer. He insisted that Christ is the Lord of the church, and His Word is the church's law. Zwingli believed that Christians have no liberty to introduce forms or customs into the ministry of the church unless Christ has authorized them. Therefore, any ritual or observance that is not authorized in the Bible must be regarded as forbidden by the church.

Baptists have taken Zwingli's side in this disagreement. The church is not our church to do with as we please. No, the church belongs to Christ, Who founded it and bought it with His Own blood. For this reason, Christ is the Lord of the church, and He alone has the authority to say what should or should not be practiced within it. Christians do not possess the prerogative to introduce new doctrine or order on

their own initiative. When they do so, they are usurping a right that belongs to Christ alone. Whatever is not clearly authorized in the Bible, we must regard as forbidden.

Baptists are not the only Christians who recognize this principle. The Reformed movement has been strongly influenced by Zwingli. Most Presbyterian and Reformed churches acknowledge what they call the “Regulative Principle,” which is their label for the belief that all Christian doctrine and church order must be drawn from the Scripture itself. Baptists have called this principle the “Rule of Prescription.” Compare, for example, the following comments from Calvin and Gill on Hebrews 8:5. The verse reads, “Who [the Levitical priests] serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.” The first quotation comes from John Calvin’s commentary on Hebrews:

Secondly, we are here taught that all those modes of worship are false and spurious, which men allow themselves by their own wit to invent, and beyond God’s command; for since God gives this direction, that all things are to be done according to his own rule, it is not lawful for us to do anything different from it; for these two forms of expression, “see that thou do all things according to the patterns,” and, “See that thou do nothing beyond the pattern,” amount to the same thing. Then by enforcing the rule delivered by himself, he prohibits us to depart from it even in the least thing. For this reason all the modes of worship taught by men fall to the ground, and also those things called sacraments which have not proceeded from God.

Thirdly, let us hence learn that there are no true symbols of religion but those which conform to what Christ requires. We must then take heed, lest we, while seeking to adapt our own inventions to Christ, transfigure him, as the Papists do, so that he should not be at all like himself; for it does not belong to us to devise anything as we please, but to God alone it belongs to show us what to do; it is to be “according to the pattern” showed to us. .

Calvin is, of course, a leading figure for Presbyterian and Reformed churches. In the paragraphs above he gives a clear articulation of the Regulative Principle. The next citation comes from John Gill, who was an early Baptist theologian. He is commenting on the same passage, Hebrews 8:5:

It may be gathered from hence, that whatever is done in a way of religious worship, should be according to a divine rule; a church of Christ ought to be formed according to the primitive pattern, and should consist, not of all that are born in a nation, province, or parish; nor should all that are born of believing parents be admitted into it; no unholy, unbelieving, and unconverted persons, only such as are true believers in Christ, and who are baptized according as the word of God directs; the officers of a church should be only of two sorts, bishops, elders, pastors or overseers, and deacons; the ordinances are baptism, which should only be administered to believers, and by immersion, and the Lord’s supper, of which none should partake, but those who have tasted that the Lord is gracious; and this should be performed as Christ performed it, and as the Apostle Paul received it from him; the discipline of Christ’s house should be regarded, and all the laws of it carefully and punctually in execution; and a conversation becoming the Gospel should be attended to.

Gill is articulating the same principle as Calvin: the Rule of Prescription. Obviously, Gill the Baptist takes the principle in directions of which Calvin the Reformer would not approve. Baptists do differ from the Reformed in their application of this principle, and those differences do constitute other Baptist distinctives. However much they differ over the application of the principle, nonetheless, they both recognize the validity of the principle itself.

Baptists insist that the nature of the church, its mission and ministry, its organization, officers, membership, ordinances and worship are to be defined by the positive teachings of the New Testament. When it comes to operating their churches, Baptists do not ask, “Does the New Testament forbid this practice?” Instead, they ask, “Does the New Testament authorize this practice?” If it does not, then they almost always regard it as forbidden.

I say “almost always” because one or two important exceptions to this rule exist. First, Baptists recognize that the New Testament may not specify every means by which its own requirements are to be fulfilled. Second, Baptists acknowledge some administrative latitude in arranging the details of church life, even where Scripture is silent. Therefore, even though the New Testament does not specifically authorize church buildings, it does require churches to meet, and the choice to construct a building is allowable as a means of expediting effective church meetings. Since the New Testament does not specify a time at which churches will meet, we assume that the congregation has a certain amount of liberty in determining the hour: after all, the church has to meet at *some* time. The distribution of gospel tracts is not specifically authorized, but Christians are commanded to evangelize, and handing out tracts is taken to be consistent with New Testament patterns of evangelization.

Baptists do disagree from time to time about whether a particular activity falls within the purview of New Testament church order (so do Anabaptists and Presbyterians). We have sometimes debated whether instrumental music should be allowed in church services, and we have also disagreed over whether we are permitted to sing hymns of non-inspired, human composition (as opposed to biblical Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs). Even where they have disagreed on the particular applications of the principle, however, Baptists have agreed about the principle itself.

Baptists, therefore, are distinguished from other groups of Christians by their authority for church faith and order. While some other groups of Christians find the church in both Testaments, Baptists find it only in the New. While some groups of Christians are willing to superimpose their church faith and order upon the silence of the Bible, Baptists insist that, given a couple of qualifications, the doctrine and practice of the church must be derived from the positive teachings, permissions, and requirements of the New Testament. ✘

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

The Spirit Breathes Upon the Word

William Cowper (1779)

The Spirit breathes upon the Word,
And brings the truth to sight;
Precepts and promises afford
A sanctifying light.

A glory gilds the sacred page,
Majestic like the sun;
It gives a light to ev'ry age;
It gives, but borrows none.

The hand that gave it still supplies
The gracious light and heat;
His truths upon the nations rise;
They rise, but never set.

Let everlasting thanks be thine,
For such a bright display
As makes a world of darkness shine
With beams of heav'nly day. ✠

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