

Going Beyond What Is Written

When one visits my Web Site, he or she may sign my *Guest Book* there and leave a short note, if it pleases. Those greetings are appreciated. One of those recent notes caught my attention especially. A brother from North Carolina left this message:

“It’s great to have another Christian site on the Web. While you are teaching ‘Freedom’ you might also teach 1 Cor. 4:6, ‘do not go beyond what is written.’ Abihu and Nadab went beyond what was written and paid the price.” (He signed his name, but I will not use it here.)

I do not have time to give detailed answers to all letters and questions, and I have no inclination to enter into controversy with anyone. However, because my response to this note may be of wider interest, I will comment on it here with no intent to offend or embarrass. His concern is courteous and sincere.

More than half a century ago, these two references were favorites of mine for use as warnings like this brother has used them. After using them for many years, I began to look more closely to see if they taught what I was making them say. Let me share what I found.

“Do not go beyond what is written” was a black-and-white tool to use against things I was convinced were wrong. Since I could not find written authority for instrumental music in worship, the use of candles, incense, or images in worship, sprinkling for baptism, infant baptism, church creeds, or use of special singing groups, it was clear to me that those and other *unauthorized* practices were going beyond what is written, hence sinful.

Of course, I did not apply that to the *non-authorized* division of the assembly into classes, use of individual communion glasses, collection trays, “placing membership,” church-owned property, legal incorporation of the congregation with trustees to own property, “church” weddings, indoor baptistries, paid ministers for the congregation (except for elders), singing classes, or singing with four-part harmony with a leader beating time and others patting their feet. I already accepted those things, so that made them right! I refused to do some of the things that were plainly written (authorized) like anointing the sick with oil, washing feet, greeting with a holy kiss, lifting up hands in prayer, having a female deacon, letting women pray and prophesy in the assembly when they observed proper decorum, and laying hands on appointees with fasting and prayer.

One does not have to be too smart to see that either I was inconsistent or my proof-text did not mean what I thought it meant, or both. It took me longer to admit my inconsistency than to recognize it.

What was written that they and we should not go beyond? In 1 Corinthians 1:31, Paul had quoted what “was written” in Jeremiah 9:24, “as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.’” The divisive nature of the Corinthian congregation revealed pride and boasting among its leaders. Paul and Apollos were not leading divisions, but Paul put their names in the place of the divisive ones, stating, “I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brethren, that you may learn by us to live according to scripture (*not to go beyond the things which are written*-ASV; *not to think of men above that which is written* -KJV), that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.”

How could I ever have twisted that to apply to things mentioned above which I opposed? Jeremiah had nothing of that nature in mind. Neither did Paul. Read the first four chapters including this text to see that they were “thinking of men above what is written” when they in their pride boasted of wisdom and followed divisive men. Another of my proof texts bites the dust, unless I am too proud to admit it, thus “going beyond the scriptures” by being puffed up by pride like the Corinthians.

But I still had Nadab and Abihu to use to create awe in the hearts of sincere people who might stray “beyond what was commanded.” “Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev. 10:1f).

What was going on there? Did they choose unholy (“strange”) fire which presumed on the silence of the scriptures? Had God given a commandment on the matter? Or had God given no definition of the fire to be used, and the two priests tested the silence of God?

Full explanation of this incident is not given in the Scriptures. In the context of Chapter 9, however, when Israel followed God’s original instructions for offering sacrifices, *fire came down from the Lord to the altar* and consumed the sacrifices. The altar fire was *God’s fire!* But Nadab and Abihu offered unholy fire and they, instead of their sacrifices, were consumed by the fire of God. After their deaths, Aaron was instructed to use coals of *fire from the altar* to burn incense (Lev. 16:12). We may conclude from this evidence that those two priests knew what God had commanded. If not, their whole procedure was unauthorized. Evidently

they set themselves in opposition to God displaying either ignorance or defiance by using fire which God had not commanded. In Biblical accounts, God has not reacted so dramatically against sins of ignorance. If they had been trying sincerely to honor God, they certainly knew what to do. They were not presuming upon the “silence of the Scriptures.” Their hearts were not right. They were challenging God.

In my review of this incident and my making it prohibit any worship not specifically commanded of God, I had to revisit with personal honesty many scenes of Bible record. Will you look at some of them again with me at this time?

In various ages we see persons offering unspecified (unauthorized!) acts of worship that were accepted. All people of all ages have been granted the privilege of praise. God has accepted, and expected, sincere worship even from those who had no direct or written revelation. He has looked upon the heart of the worshipper more than the technique of his praise. Men have been permitted to worship in formal procedures that expressed the feeling of the worshipper's heart so long as it (1) accomplished the purpose of praise, (2) was upbuilding to others present, (3) avoided sacramental and idolatrous concepts, (4) did not venerate objects, and (5) did not set aside God's prescribed actions or purposes. Let us look at some Biblical precedents that give basis to this premise. We have tended to overlook or misapply these.

☺ There is no indication that Abel was commanded either to make an offering or to offer from his flock. He was a man of faith, and because of it he and his sacrifice were acceptable (Heb. 11:4). We must no longer misapply Romans 10:17 in an effort to prove that God instructed him.

☺ When it is stated that, in the time of Enosh, "men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26), and when Abram "built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord" (Gen. 12:8), there is no indication that they did this in response to a command or specification of God. The record gives no indication that God told Abraham to offer the ram instead of Isaac.

☺ Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, made an altar of it, and poured oil on it in spontaneous worship without “authority” from God (Gen. 28:18). On another occasion, Jacob set up an altar and poured a drink offering and oil upon it (Gen. 35:14).

☺ Samuel drew water and poured it out before Jehovah and fasted (1 Sam. 7:6). David took the water brought from Bethlehem and poured it out to the Lord (2 Sam. 23:16). Where were their commands to do that?

☺ With the defeat of Haman's plan to destroy the Jews, "*the Jews ordained and took it upon themselves to establish the custom that they and their descendants and all who would join them should without fail observe these two days every year, in the way prescribed and at the time appointed*" (Esther 9:27). Thus the Feast of Purim was initiated without authorization from God.

☺ The Feast of Dedication, today known as Hanukkah, was a Jewish holiday commemorating the rededication of the Temple of Jerusalem after its defilement by Antiochus of Syria. There is no indication that God commanded this feast, yet Jesus was involved with it (John 9:22).

☺ Without instruction from the Law of Moses, the Jews had added wine to the Passover (Luke 22:14-18; Matt. 26:26-28), dancing before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:12f; Psalms 149:3), and the entire synagogue service. Rather than being condemned for those unauthorized activities of worship, they were privileged to serve/worship in those ways. *Unscriptural* activities are not necessarily *anti-scriptural*. Because an activity may be *unauthorized* does not necessarily mean that it is *prohibited*. The very Old Covenant writings that give us these two "prooftexts" indicate approval of all those unauthorized methods used to honor God.

☺ Paul commended the Athenians, declaring, "For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Although their understanding of God's nature was very limited and they knew not any code of laws from him, they had the privilege of worship, and their homage at that altar was not expressed in "five acts of worship" on Sundays. Paul did not condemn their devotion to the "unknown god" but enlarged on their understanding about his identity.

☺ In Chapter 1 of Romans, Paul declared that the Gentiles were without excuse because, having known God as revealed in nature, they "did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..." (v.21), "and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (v. 25). How could they have properly honored God, given thanks of praise to him, and worshipped and served the Creator since they had no revealed law? God has given all men, even the uninstructed, the privilege of praise and worship!

☺ In the New Testament writings we see numerous "unauthorized" actions of worship which were undemanded, unrehearsed, spontaneous, and extravagant; yet they met with approval. Although these were not done in Christian assemblies, they were expressions of approved worship and they

illustrate the principle of acceptable worship. *Worship is worship whether done privately or in an assembly.*

☺ The Wise Men offered birthday gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus without evident instructions to do so (Matt. 2:1-11). It was their privilege to praise through that means.

☺ There are several instances of people falling before Jesus and worshipping him with no rebuke for their impulsive action. They had no command or instruction to worship in such a manner. An adoring crowd took their coats and leafy branches of trees and spread them before Jesus (Matt. 21:8f). We may do homage to God by bowing before him or by lifting up our hands to him. If the *amen* of approval at the end of a prayer is a part of the worship, so would the clapping of approval of the sentiment expressed in a song be worship also.

☺ Mary was neither rebuked for anointing Jesus without authorization nor considered presumptuous in using nard without instruction to do so (John 12:1f).

☺ The sinful woman was not commanded to wash Jesus' feet with tears nor to use her hair as a towel (Luke 7:36-50). She was exercising her privilege of spontaneous worship.

☺ According to the rules we have made, Paul sinned in cutting his hair in a ritual relating to a vow (Acts 21:23-16) and when he purified himself ritually and arranged for an offering in accordance to the Law of Moses. We would also have to censure the Judean disciples who "are zealous for the law". But we approve of disciples circumcising their infant sons, and we commend them for tithing.

With the sacrifice of Jesus, God did not suddenly come to hate the worship rituals of the law. Disciples could still keep those rituals of worship so long as they did not seek justification by those means. Neither should we assume that, when Jesus died, God began to hate circumcision, praise accompanied by instruments, or the observance of days, which things he had accepted for centuries. Who are we to define what God likes or dislikes when he has accepted many different expressions of devotion?

Our great stress has been on the need for authority for all that we do in worship assemblies. We have emphasized the ritualistic aspect of worship. But where is our authority for segmenting worship from our daily and constant offering of self in whole-life worship? Where do the scriptures say that our assemblies for edification are to be changed into "worship services" with a different set of rules to govern them? Where do we read such expressions as "go to worship" (regarding Christian assemblies),

"begin our worship service," "after the worship is over," and "missing worship"? Where do we read of the "five acts of worship" or a list of specified activities for our assemblies? Where do we find a limitation of the means whereby we may praise God and edify one another, either in or out of assemblies? Has our privilege of praise been granted in only a few activities? *Is it a privilege of praise or a fulfillment of the demands of law to praise?* Do we worship only in rituals? Are assemblies for the purpose of performance of rituals? Seeking answers to these questions led me to many exciting new (for me) insights.

In my restudy I became painfully aware that my two prooftexts, along with a long menu of others like them, were being misused to distort truth. In my application of them, I was "going beyond what is written" by trying to bind what God had not legislated! And I began to see that our "command, example, and necessary inference" approach to interpretation of God's will is a sad outgrowth of our effort to serve God through a supposed system of law. That formula cannot be followed consistently, and it has spawned our frequent divisions.

It was with some dismay that I was forced to conclude this: **There is no record in the Bible of God rejecting the sincere worship of anyone, regardless of the form of expression, or whether it had been commanded or not. God has always given all people, even the uninformed, the privilege of praise.**

It will be no surprise to me if some of you are shocked and dismayed by my conclusions if you do not understand the route that led me to them. So I urge you to start at my beginning by reading my first book, *Free In Christ*. I will give you a free copy if you will send your address. Some of the points of this essay are taken from Chapter 26 of *Free To Change*, which I can send postpaid for \$6.50.

All who serve God in humble sincerity are to be commended even though they may not fully understand his will – and who does? If any lay unwarranted strictures upon themselves, they are to be respected for their earnestness. However, if those personal convictions are made into criterion for judging, rejecting, and dividing there is evidence of sinful attitude.

If I were to try to lead you into an exclusive division of God's family which I might be promoting (even an *I am of Christ party!*), I would be doing what Paul warned against. Like the Corinthian leaders, I would be "going beyond what is written." Paul demands that I "not be inflated with pride as you patronize one and flout the other" (1 Cor. 4:6, NEB). [ch]