

## Going “Beyond What is Written”

All the way back to John Calvin, it’s been argued that instruments in the worship service are wrong because there is no scriptural authority for them—and anything done without authority is sin. This is known in theological circles as the Regulative Principle. Lately, such publications as the *Gospel Advocate* have forthrightly come out in favor of the Regulative Principle, despite its origins in the heart of Calvinism, a system of thought rejected by the Churches of Christ from the very beginning of the Restoration Movement.

There’s no requirement in scripture that we only do that which is authorized in scripture. This can be seen if we carefully consider the classic arguments in support of this argument—some going all the way back to John Calvin. Most of these arguments have been addressed in previous postings, but this last one needs to be addressed.

### *The parade of horrors argument*

The first argument is to point out that if we were to do things on which the Bible is silent, then all sorts of horrors would arise—typically, the veneration of Mary and other Catholic practices. The counter-examples tend to be Catholic, because the authority argument was incubated in the early days of the Protestant Reformation to demonstrate the errors of medieval Catholicism.

However, the authority argument is hardly necessary to make the case. The argument against the veneration of Mary is not based on silence but on such passages as,

(Exo. 20:3) “You shall have no other gods before me.”

(Psa. 73:25) Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

(Isa. 43:10b-11) “Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior.”

In fact, the very nature of the argument demonstrates its weakness. The examples of evils on which the scriptures are supposedly silent are always the sorts of things that we *already* know to be wrong—from other scriptures.

The real test of the argument would be to take something otherwise morally neutral to see whether it becomes *solely* wrong because of a lack of authority. For example, we baptize in the midst of our services. Every scriptural example of baptism takes place apart from a worship service—and yet we feel perfectly justified in conducting most of our baptisms during worship. This is a practice that, so far as I’ve been able to find, is less than 200 years old—less than 10% of the history of Christianity. Baptism isn’t even one of our so-called five acts of worship.

And yet we baptize during the church service and feel happy about—as well we should. There’s nothing wrong with the practice and there’s much to commend it. But we

do so utterly without command, inference, or example and in the teeth of numerous contrary examples. But the obvious advantages of the practice and the sheer joy a baptism brings to the worship plainly justify the practice. Hence, the authority argument just doesn't hold.

### *The proof text*

Next, we should consider the "proof" text relied on to assert that authority is essential. The foremost proof text is,

(1 Cor. 4:6) Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, "**Do not go beyond what is written.**" **Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.**

What was Paul talking about? First Corinthians is likely the first of the New Testament books to have been written, so he obviously couldn't have been referring to the New Testament as "what is written." He wasn't saying only do in worship those things exemplified in the New Testament, as there *was* no New Testament.

In fact, we also often argue that special gifts of the Holy Spirit were granted in those days because the New Testament had not yet been completed, and so special guidance was required. Obviously, therefore, Paul is not referring to written instructions as to how to conduct the assembly. In fact, he's not saying that the writings the Corinthians had are comprehensive and sufficient. They weren't at that time.

Rather, "what is written" is plainly a reference to the Old Testament, as most commentaries conclude. More precisely, it's a reference to the Old Testament passages Paul had just quoted—

(1 Cor. 3:19-23) For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "**He catches the wise in their craftiness**"; *20* and again, "**The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.**" *21* So then, **no more boasting about men!** All things are yours, *22* whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future--all are yours, *23* and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

His point is to condemn the Corinthians' letting themselves be judged by humans rather than by God and so being prideful over the others. Do not think you are better than others, for just as soon as you think that, God will judge you. Do not go beyond—do not think more highly of yourselves than—what God has said. Don't think you're smarter than God! Don't supplement God's work to fill in the gaps. Don't make yourself the judge of your fellow Christians. Don't consider yourself superior because of your intellectual accomplishments!

This passage goes further back to—

(1 Cor. 3:16-17) Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.

“You yourselves” and “you” are both plural in the Greek, so that he is speaking of the congregation, not the Christian's physical body. To destroy God's temple is to destroy God's congregation—a local church, and destruction is promised to those who divide the saved from the saved.

Paul wisely discerns that the attitude that leads to division is pride in oneself, especially pride in one's intellect. If you believe that you have to discern the silences of the Scriptures with perfect accuracy to go to heaven, then you've damned all those who can't read the silences. Fortunately for you, you know which silences are bindings and which allow for expediency. You know which ones matter and which ones don't. You claim a knowledge that goes far beyond what's written, and this is a very dangerous thing indeed.

The thing that is clearly condemned here is division—not disagreeing over how to dissect the spaces between the verses in the Bible. And it's a cruel irony that we are dividing over the very verse that condemns division!

A similar interpretation is offered by Coffman in his commentary on 1 Corinthians. He suggests Paul was saying: do not evaluate the words of men as on a parity with the words of God, that is, do not add to the Bible. Thus, do not make commands that God has not made.

The lesson is much the same. If we presume to find commands in the silences, we are adding to the word of God, a very dangerous practice indeed. Therefore, when the *Gospel Advocate* damns instrumental churches for violating God's “clear commands,” they've plainly added to the word of God. There is no command banning instrumental music, and so no “clear command” could have been violated. Therefore, the *Gospel Advocate* (and many others of our publications) has gone beyond that which is written. Sadly. Tragically.